

A Winning Mindset: Episode 5 - Meica Horsburgh

Andy Stevenson: Hello and welcome to A Winning Mindset: Lessons From The Paralympics, a podcast brought to you by the International Paralympic Committee and longstanding partner, Allianz. We want you to gain some new perspectives on the world and learn what you hear from my Paralympic guests to help you in your personal and professional lives. In this episode, I'll be speaking to Australian goalball player Meica Horsburgh. She was born with a visual impairment and as a youngster survived a period of bullying that drove her to the brink. We'll be discussing those dark times and the importance of mental health, as she now captains the Aussie Belles goalball team.

Just a warning that we do discuss being bullied to the point of suicidal feelings, so if you think this could be triggering for you, please bear that in mind if you choose to carry on listening.

Meica hello, how's lockdown been for you in Brisbane, Australia?

Meica Horsburgh: In Brisbane we're actually pretty lucky as I've had a little bit of freedom. We had a bit of lockdown when Covid all first started and the last couple of months we haven't had too much.

AS: When people hear about visual impairments, they don't always realise that there are varying degrees. Just in your own ordinary life, can you describe the extent and the type of your vision impairment?

MH: Yeah so I have ocular albinism, so for the general public I'm known as an albino. I'm pretty lucky as I have pretty good vision but when you break it down, it's only 10% of what a normal person would see. On an eye chart it is the top letter. An ordinary person would see at 60 metres, I can only see at six.

AS: And are you seeing colour, shapes, light and everything or is there an impact there?

MH: I can see shapes, colour, everything. Things that are hard for me are not being able to drive, I struggle with public transport but I rely on it as well. Obviously computer screens I have to have a lot larger. Sometimes recognising people is a lot of fun too. People think I'm being rude but nope, I just can't see you!

AS: And the albinism again, some won't know what that is. Could you just explain that to us?

MH: Yeah there is ocular albinism which means just eye and then there's skin and eye, so it means you've got no pigment. With the eye condition you are very light sensitive so it hurts when going out in sunlight and it is very hard to see. A lot of people also have nystagmus which means your eyes move back and forth. They just dart.

AS: I think one of the really interesting things is two of your siblings have albinism and two don't. What was that like for you all growing up, that mixture of those who could see perfectly and those who couldn't.

MH: Growing up it wasn't too bad. It is funny that when I'm describing them I call them the brown sister and the white sister and they understand that. Mum and dad treated us equally and concentrated on what we could do, not what we couldn't. We would just get out there and do it until later on in life when things started to get a little harder.

AS: I'm disabled myself and I think children just go 'okay, that person's different, we'll carry on' and I guess as a family, you just rubbed along.

MH: Yeah one gang. I probably got picked on the most because I was the baby.

AS: Have you always been an ambitious person or did you worry life might be limited?

MH: I always got out there and did things and it wasn't until I got older that fear got in the way a bit.

AS: I read a quote from you recently that said 'after finding goalball, I found my place in life'. What did you mean by that?

MH: When you're a young child you fit in but when you get to high school, people start to realise things a little bit and in my teenager years I got teased a lot and really struggled. I hated life, I hated myself, I didn't know why I was the one that was different. I think a lot of people with a disability go through that at some stage and it wasn't until I found goalball that I realised I did have something to add to the world.

AS: You say teasing but would you describe it as bullying?

MH: Yeah, definitely.

AS: And how bad did the bullying get?

MH: It got pretty bad. It was daily. I got called a lot of names. Casper because my skin is very white. Someone once said 'tell your mum to bleach her clothes and not her children.' Even my own brother, which is funny enough because he is also has albinism, he told me to wrap a string around my head and act like a tampon. It got to the point where there was nothing to live for. I did around the age of 13 try to take my own life. And it took a while and throughout my first bit of goalball, I struggled a lot. I do think sport saved me.

AS: Why do you think bullies do this kind of thing? Why do people think it's okay to tease and abuse others?

MH: I think they might be lacking something in their own life. They struggle with things and it's easier to take it out on other people. They think they're funny and people will laugh at them, they become the cool kid.

AS: How were you dealing with it and who would you turn to at the time?

MH: I suppose I didn't really turn to anyone. I was angry a lot of the time, angry enough to get into a fight. I punched somebody and I was just angry at the world. At the time I wasn't even in my own body, I was on the outside looking in,

and that really scared me. I didn't know how to talk about it. After trying to take my own life I got a bit of counselling and that helped.

AS: What pulled you back, if you don't mind me asking, from the brink of that suicide attempt at 13?

MH: Goalball and getting my frustrations on court, finding a place I'd fit in. I'd know I wasn't alone and people would go through the same things as you. Yes you might stand out but you belong and just trying to change my mindset really helped.

AS: And how were your family reacting?

MH: Mum and dad have been through a lot of crap with the five of us, my older brother had a hard childhood too. He didn't try and take his own life but he was a very angry kid who didn't get through high school. They really struggled but I'm so thankful for them and I wouldn't be the person I am today without them. I do love them and I'm thankful for everything they've done for me.

AS: 15 years later, how would you support someone going through similar?

MH: My niece, she doesn't have albinism but often she talks about how she hates certain things about herself, and I just try to make her understand she should love herself because we all belong, we all have a place in the world. And if we were all the same, it would be so boring! So I just try and make anyone understand that you should love yourself. My favourite quote is 'why try so hard to fit in when you were born to stand out?' I've found the strength to love myself and there is so much to love about the world.

AS: The Paralympics is increasingly about social inclusion, diversity, and I guess this feeds into what you're saying about standing out, don't just fit in. Be proud. Now you're a Paralympian, captain of the Australian goalball team, do you feel this is you being able to turn around to the bullies and say 'this is how successful I've been in my life'?

MS: Yeah definitely. I'm really proud of how far I've come and there is a bit of that. Also to a lot of my teachers, I was a terrible child! A lot of them wrote me off and saw me as a bad child, so it's good to be able to say 'I was bad, but I came out of it. Look how much I have achieved'

AS: Would you say that goalball saved your life?

MH: 100%. If I didn't find it I don't know where I'd be today. I don't think I'd be alive. If it wasn't me trying to commit suicide, I would have gone down the wrong path. I started playing a little bit of it at school when I was about 14. And then I played socially on the weekend. One of the girls I went to school with was in the team at the time and the coach asked me to come along to a training camp.

AS: For those people listening who might not know goalball, could you just give us a brief basic rundown of what the sport is?

MH: So goalball is specifically for blind and vision impaired athletes. Everybody is blindfolded to make it equal. You can have vision or no vision and having a blindfold has us all on the same playing field. You have a 1.25kg ball with bells in it and then you play on the indoor volleyball court that's 18x9 metres. There's a

goal at each end and you have to try and score by throwing the ball past people who basically try and chuck themselves on the ground to stop it going in the goal.

AS: It's a fantastic sport and I've seen a fair bit of it myself at Paralympic Games. There's a fair bit of that part where the crowd have to be silent don't they.

MH: Yeah. Sometimes it's not the best spectator sport because you can't go crazy as much as you want, but it is really good to watch once you understand.

AS: There's something brilliant about the tension in the crowd, you have to be quiet at key moments and focused on the court. I want to ask about the sensations you feel when playing goalball. On court you all wear eye masks, so does that change what you're sensing compared to life off the court?

MH: Yeah a little bit. You can't see things so you have to visualise a lot harder and listen a lot more than you would in everyday life. When people are talking to you as well, when you're with your coach you have to get a really good understanding of how they deliver messages because you don't have the visual cues. Your senses are a lot more.

AS: Your team are known as the Aussie Belles and you made your international debut at 15, just two years after your suicide attempt. Do you ever sit back and think 'that is extraordinary, to have gone from that to that'?

MH: Yes definitely. But at the time goalball wasn't very big, we lost a few players after 2000 so I was very lucky. Now I wouldn't get on the team. I worked hard but I was lucky to get on the team.

AS: Do people treat you differently now you're an athlete representing your country? Or do you think there are people out there still trying to poke fun and belittle you and your teammates in some way?

MH: Oh I definitely think there are a lot out there who would. Disability is one of those things where we have come along way, but people make fun of people because they are different. You are an athlete. I have a tattoo on my back of the Olympic Rings and the Agitos and people come up, 'Oh my God, were you in the Olympics?' 'Yeah I was in the Paralympics' and they just give you a little smile and walk away like they're not interested. That is just as good as competing in the Olympics and having people look at you with admiration, we've got a long way to go.

AS: Do you think the Paralympic Movement is helping that?

MH: I think it is. Especially in the years I've been involved, it has dramatically changed but we have a very long way to go.

AS: It's been a rollercoaster for the Belles in terms of Games. You didn't qualify for Beijing but you led the team in 2010 and as captain to 2012, which was your first Games and first since Sydney. Rio you get in at the last minute, so it's been real up and down. But how special was captaining at London?

MH: It was a dream come true. I always loved sport growing up and thought I'd be in the Olympics but finding goalball, it turned into the Paralympics and it was something I worked so hard for. To be captain, it's so hard to put it into words.

Walking out in the opening ceremony with the team by my side is something I'll never forget.

AS: London 2012 in terms of the matches were a struggle, how difficult was it to cope with that? Or was the excitement of being there just enough to carry you through?

MH: Look we weren't even supposed to qualify for London. We didn't have a lot of funding and the APC didn't pick us up until 2010 and their goal was to get us to Rio. For us to qualify for London was such an achievement. We didn't go in thinking we'd medal. And we did as well as we could have. Our first game was against Japan who won gold, and we only 2-0. And it was a pretty amazing achievement for us.

AS: As skipper, what kind of things are you doing to really help your teammates?

MH: I don't think I really do anything much different. We all have a role to play and I try to lead by example, in training and just try and be a positive influence on the girls. I just need them to know I'm there when they need me, and I try to be there when the coaches can't be.

AS: Very modest again. You came in as a 15-year-old, so do you feel you need to be there for the younger players and for their mental health as well?

MH: I try to but to be completely honest with you, I think a lot of people find me intimidating. Some of the girls get intimidated by me because I have played for so long!

AS: And on court? Are you a vocal captain? Because intimidating isn't necessarily bad is it.

MH: I wouldn't think it's a bad thing but some people do. It happens in every day life as well, because I'm a little bit bigger! I try not to show too much emotion on court and if I do, it's probably the 'let's get out there and get it done', angry sort of emotion.

AS: Do you know where the line is? Has what you went through when younger helped?

MH: Definitely. I have my fair share of cries where I need to.

AS: And looking ahead to Tokyo, is your determination to succeed still as strong as ever?

MH: Definitely. I want it to be, it will be my last Paralympics. Knowing it's your last you need to give 110%. Getting on the podium would be amazing but just to beat our position from the last two Paralympics would be amazing too. It's hard. You're going out there and playing against the top teams in the world. A lot are funded, they have live-in programmes and we're playing professionals. It will be hard but I'll put in everything I can to see where this team would go.

AS: Now goalball has come into your personal life because you married Jon Horsburgh, a fellow goalball player in 2012. How did that come about? I'm sure you were training in squads together and that kind of thing.

MH: He lived in Melbourne, I lived in Brisbane and we saw each other once a month at training camps. And then we travelled together to a couple of tournaments and fell in love!

AS: And are you similar characters?

MH: Erm, in some ways yes, in some ways no. We're definitely determined and that's what I love about Jon. We are determined to get where we need to.

AS: We have a little surprise for you, listen to this.

Jon Horsburgh: Meica, it has been a privilege to be a part of your journey so far. From the ups and downs from goalball and life, it's amazing to see how you have grown as a person and how you strive to achieve the goals you have set out with planning, day to day activities, to make sure these are achieved. I am honoured to be a part of your journey and wish you all the success that you are striving for.

MH: Oh, that's cute! Thanks.

AS: And he's not sat there in the same room, just to clarify! Do you think there's a special quality to the two of you together, not just because you're goalball players, but because you're both vision impaired. Do you feel like you take on the world together a little bit?

MH: Yeah erm, it has a lot of challenges both being vision impaired. Not being able to drive it's hard to get to places, and you can't just go and have camping trips. But life is easier having a partner that understands the challenges you face in life.

AS: I heard a rumour that you prepare for goalball matches by listening to loud music and being, quotes, 'silly'. Is that true?

MH: Yeah I have definitely done a lot of that in the past, yes! Doing anything to get my mind off the game, I don't like thinking about what's about to happen. Before our games we'll play some drama games. One of the girls in our group is a drama teacher and they do games in school, so she brings new ones out and we play those. The Japan team heard us doing one one day and now they yell 'HAH' when they see us, which is one of the games we play.

AS: That's brilliant! So it's a way of taking your mind off things, avoiding any pre-match nerves? And what's your go to music track before a match?

MH: It used to be the final countdown because that played a lot during the 2010 World Championships in Sheffield. But that's gone off the playlist because it got a bit boring. A lot of the music is a bit of Jimmy Barnes, some easy listening, pump up music. But not screamo, I don't like screamo!

AS: I'm going to make myself sound very old here, but what's screamo?!

MH: I don't know what it's technically called but when people sit there and just go 'OHHHH YEAAAAHHH'!

AS: So a little more reserved then! Just to finish, what would you say to the bullies now if you could go back?

MH: Nothing you say was going to get in my way.

AS: And what about if somebody is listening who might be going through a period of bullying or harassment. What would you say to them?

MH: Your life might be hard now, but you will get through it and you will rise above it. And life is definitely worth living, you just need to find the strength to carry on and find your place in the world. Whatever that may be, find your place and shine.

AS: Well Meica, thank you so much for being so candid and honest about everything but particularly those tough years you had. We definitely wish you luck in Tokyo. When will you be able to train again with your team?

MH: Good question! I'm not actually too sure. Every month we say we'll have a camp and something new happens. I'm really unsure.

AS: Bit rusty when you start back do you think?

MH: Oh no, I'll be great. I can train here so in Queensland, we still train normally. I feel sorry for the other girls because they'll have to train with me!

AS: I'm sat here thinking about the other girls and feeling like you're going to push them hard when you get back!

MH: Oh I sure will!

AS: Well powerful words there from Meica Horsburgh. If you or someone you know has been affected by anything you've heard in the last half an hour or so, advice can be found at [paralympic.org/mentalhealth](https://www.paralympic.org/mentalhealth). These podcasts have been created by the International Paralympic Committee and Allianz because we believe the stories that you've heard can help you in your own life and give you a new perspective. Meica showed the power of sport and for me, what came across most strongly was how Meica changed her mindset from trying to fit in to allowing herself to stand out and shine. Next week my guest will be French wheelchair basketball player, Grace Wembolua. As a child she survived an arson attack on her home, but it was a fire which killed her mother and brother. Grace herself sustained burns and had to have both legs amputated. She'll be talking to us about body confidence and coming to accept her injuries and scars, to the point where she is now a model and beauty ambassador with a huge social media following. Don't miss that one and please like, rate and subscribe to this podcast. Bye for now.