



AS: What's your personal best?

SO: My personal best memory is 2008 in Beijing. I was competing for just one World Championships in 2006 and my first international competition and I got silver. I was very sad because I got silver but I liked it because this means a lot. Because for me if I got a gold in the first international competition maybe I was in this way (if I won gold), thinking the Paralympic sport is easy because I can go for the first time and I got the gold! Then I will not train anymore. But because I've got silver I think in a different way. It's not easy. I must train. I must do different things to be a gold medallist. For this reason I tried to train more and I was training three times a week. After the World Championships, I was training for six sessions. I'd take just one day to relax. And my first Big Event was Beijing 2008 and I got one gold and I broke the world and Paralympic record. It was I think it was 194 (weight) and I broke it with two (lifts of) 202.5. I will not forget it, ever.

AS: What's the heaviest weight you've lifted?

SO: It was in Rio 2016. I pushed it to 211kg. It was my best result ever and it was a new world and Paralympic record too.

AS: For some people listening in some parts of the world it equates to about 33 stone which is just incredible. I think I weight about 12 or 13 stone, so it's three of me! You've got huge muscles and huge biceps on your arms. How much work do you have to do in the gym and what's your diet to enable you to be this strong?

SO: Every athlete faces a lot of problems about their diet. you need power from your muscles, they need protein. If you eat carbohydrates your body grows and grows, your category goes up and up, so you'll be in a difficult category and it's not easy. My first international competition was in 2006. Do you know what my category was? 56. Now we are in 2020 and it's 59. I have almost 15 years moving just three kilo. It's very difficult but not impossible. If you want to try different things, be a memorable one, you have to do the difficult things. Every normal person does everything in a normal way, so what's the difference? Nothing. Nothing.

For us it's protein because you need power from your muscles, they need protein. If you eat carbohydrates your body grows and grows, your category goes up and up, so you'll be in a difficult category and it's not easy. It's like counting how to keep your weight and improve your kilograms. It's not easy but everyone can do it. Anyone can do everything if they want. Our power is not coming from our muscle, it's coming from our mind. You have to trust yourself, do your best and catch your dreams.

AS: Next time I go to the gym and try to lift 211kg, I'm going to say that Sherif told me to do it, he told me it's in my mind! Now where are you speaking to us from?

AS: I just want to take you back to your childhood.

I was born in 1982 in a very simple village. I have five siblings, four brothers. My father is a farmer, my mother just takes care of all of us.

SO: It was polio for both legs, 100%. I couldn't stand. I have four brothers, the second one is named Omar. Every time he tried to help me to stand up, but I'd fall down again. When I was five or six, the doctor I visited told them that when I get older, I'll get better. Five or six years things would be better. The first year in school for me, I couldn't walk. My mother carried me and put me in the school. By the end of the day, she'd bring me again, it was a very difficult moment. I liked how the mother worked to support me. Thank you mum. Then I tried to improve my legs, I could walk but

with help. I wasn't using a stick or a wheelchair, 'hey, I will not use it. I can walk!' When I got older, I got a bit better and now I can walk without a stick or wheelchair.

AS: Incredible progress. Were you the only disabled child in the village?

SO: I can remember one or two others but they were thinking in a different way. 'I cannot, please help me or carry my bag' and I didn't like to think in that way. I like to send a message that we are just different but we can.

I decided to think how I can send a message that disabled people can make anything if they just trust themselves and they want. Don't say 'hey I'm disabled, please help me to go, to find a job, please help', it's not good. You have to trust yourself and try to do it. After I finished my studies, I came to Cairo searching for work. As a seller, in a restaurant, a lot of things. I tried to send a message that disabled is a normal life. We are different but we can. After two years I was playing a sport when I was in university, and I have a friend from Cairo. He advised me 'Hey Sherif, come and do our sport' and I asked how to join and he said 'it's very difficult. You have to beat one of them to be in the team'. And I said 'I will be here in that tracksuit with them'. I was training and training. I had a dream, just one year and after six months, the coach of the national team said 'Sherif, you can come' because I pushed 150kg. After three months, 180. And I joined the team, went to Korea in 2006 and got silver.

AS: I want to take you back to your childhood. You were diagnosed with polio at nine months. What impact did that have?

SO: It was polio for both legs, 100%. I couldn't stand. I have four brothers When I was five or six, the doctor I visited told them that when I get older, I'll get better. Five or six years things would be better. The first year in school for me, I couldn't walk. My mother carried me and put me in the school. By the end of the day, she'd bring me again, it was a very difficult moment. I liked how the mother worked to support me. Thank you mum. Then I tried to improve my legs, I could walk but with help. I wasn't using a stick or a wheelchair, 'hey, I will not use it. I can walk!' When I got older, I got a bit better and now I can walk without a stick or wheelchair.

AS: Were you the only disabled child in the village?

SO: I can remember one or two others but they were thinking in a different way. 'I cannot, please help me or carry my bag' and I didn't like to think in that way. I like to send a message that we we can.

AS: What were other people's attitudes towards you as a disabled person when you were younger?

SO: Cairo is a difficult life for a disabled person. You have to search for work, if you don't have any you can't eat. Without help, you cannot live here. When I took my decision to leave my village, everyone said 'Hey Sherif, why are you leaving?' But I wanted to just try. I just came here to Cairo and never went back again, just to visit my family. Now I have work, sport, friends. It's okay. My life is good now.

AS: But people recognise you?

SO: Yes! I walk in the street and someone says 'Hey Sherif, you are the sportsman, I saw you on TV! Can we take a photo together?' and I was very happy. Wow wow. I'm not like Mo Salah, but I like to be a part of the Paralympic Movement. When I was starting my career, it was a dream to get a gold medal. Then number two. Then number three. In Rio, I'd just got down from the stage, one of the IPC media said 'Hey Sherif, how do you feel now?' and I said 'I feel I am on the middle of my road. I have a very huge dream. It's to get six gold medals in six Paralympic Games in a row.' I like to be number one.

AS: Why have you given yourself such a difficult target?

SO: Look, here in Egypt our team is very, very strong. We have people with five Paralympic medals. have a lot of legends here. But how do you be different? It's about how you become memorable and people remember you forever.

AS: People would remember you now! It's amazing that you referred to Mo Salah, because my next question is about him. I think you've seen the questions I'm going to ask! I am a Liverpool football fan so I love Mo Salah probably as much as you. But would you want to be as famous as him? He is the number one hero in Egypt. Are you envious of that?

SO: For me, fame is not my target, but nobody doesn't like being famous. I like to be different, to be memorable. To be famous like Mo is not my target. Everytime I got a gold medal in Rio 2016, he'd send me a message on Twitter like 'hey Sherif, congratulations!' I met him in London when I was coming back from Canada, I met him in the airport and we took a selfie together. He knows me and I love him.

AS: So I should be saying has he met Sherif Osman then!

SO: Haha no, no, he is better! Everyone has a good achievement and we don't face each other, we just try for success. I like sport because it sends a message for all that our flag can rise in every land without fights. This is sport.

AS: Now Mo Salah plays football with a smile on his face and you compete with a smile on your face. What does happiness mean to you?

SO: Happiness is getting gold when you are competing, then trying to send a message to your coach, your friends, your family. That your trust in me is right. I will make you proud. I just remember when I was getting gold in my last competition. I was so happy, so now when I get gold, I just say 'this is my place, I have to fight to save my title'. Happiness is like a new born. I am a new athlete.

AS: Do you think you can lift heavier weights when you're happy? SO: Yes because as I told you when starting, power comes from our mind. if you are happy and have nothing to think about, you have to focus 100%, you will be in a good mood and have good results.

AS: There must be moments something hasn't gone right. What do you do to bring that happiness back when you are feeling low?

SO: I think London 2012 was a bad time. I got a gold but I pushed 197. Why? Three or four months before, I got injured in my shoulder and my doctor advised me to stop moving for one month. Very difficult moments. Two months and 20 days later, I came back to training. I tried to train, focus, face the time. I had just 80 days to focus more. All of the people here trusted me. If you see the video for London, you can see my tears. I was crying a lot. After

London, I forgot it all. The next in 2014 was in UAE. I went down for a different category, I made a very difficult diet for 54kg. The world record was 181. My first attempt was 187. My second, 192. My third attempt, 202. My fourth, 205kg. I broke the record four times in the same competition in Dubai. How I was happy. How I was trusting myself again.

AS: We're talking about happiness so I have to ask about your celebration after the gold medal in Rio. People may have seen the video, you were jumping around, doing forward rolls.

SO: I was waiting for four years to break my record again. Look how I was hungry to break it in a Games. When I came to Rio, I was starting for 203kg, getting a gold. But it's not enough for me. I was remembering what was happening in London. I had to break my record. I jumped to 211 and was very, very happy. My second attempt with 211, the judges said 'no lift'. So I went again for the third - no lift. It's almost finished. But if you try to break the record, you can have four attempts. I was following the rules exactly. I took the bar, went down, pushed again, jumped and waited for the judge and when I saw the green light, I was very happy. I remember the four years in this moment. I could imagine how my family and friends helped me, how they were happy. I hugged my coach, I was jumping. When I saw the video, I can't remember how I jumped like this! I will try it more in Tokyo 2021.

AS: It's a shame gymnastics aren't in the Paralympics because you could win gold there as well! People who watch weightlifting at the Olympics will know the atmosphere and it was just an unbelievable moment. How do your wife and family feel about you continuing on for another three Paralympics?

SO: My wife was a sportswoman. She competed in 2006 and then she stopped. For this reason, she understood all. One more thing. My wife understands it all, she knows I have to keep calm, keep my power, she just pushes me to achieve my goals. Family is the first factory to success.

AS: And who carries the children? Two powerlifters, you can lift them with one finger! SO: We have three boys! All with one hand, no problem.

AS: So Tokyo next year, Paris, by LA you would be late 40s. How heavy a weight do you think you can lift before your career ends?

SO: I'm getting older but I'm taking care in how to improve my weight and results. My body weight is 59. I can lift more but I have steps to do it in. What will happen if I go to 65kg? My muscle will be bigger. One of my targets is if I go up to 65kg, I must break the record. And that is 221. It's difficult, but not impossible.

AS: I think that sums you up. Difficult but not impossible! It's been an absolute please speaking to you Sherif. I'd love to be there with you so that you could end this interview by lifting me up and putting me up above your head! That would be a nice funny clip to show people, but it's just an audio podcast. I look forward to watching you at three more Paralympics.

SO: Thank you. Do you know what one of my dreams is? To be one of the oldest athletes to stay and compete. So now we have the oldest athlete from UAE, he is 51 or 52, but still a champion. I have a big challenge, so I need to compete to 53 or 52. It's difficult... but not impossible.

