



Ellen Keane – A Winning Mindset: Lessons From The Paralympics

Andy Stevenson: So Ellen, I've been told that if I hear any background noise in this interview it's going to be your new miniature Dachshund in the background, is that right?

Ellen Keane: A miniature Dachshund yeah, he's currently on the floor playing with my foot and he's teething at the moment so he just keeps biting things. It's not great but he's a cutie.

AS: As long as he doesn't chew through the cable, we'll be fine.

EK: Oh, yeah, he's fine.

AS: Can we give the dog a name check?

EK: Oh yeah, Denny. No, he's looking at me, but he's not doing anything.

AS: And how much of your time is he taking up?

EK: Oh god, I feel like a mum like I feel like I have a newborn baby. I have to get up in the middle of the night and like let him out and give him a feed. I'm wrecked. It's a good thing Tokyo's postponed because apparently, I need these three weeks to let him settle.

AS: Right OK. Maybe a good size to fit in your suitcase for next summer. Now for people who don't know you, you were born with your left arm - I t just comes down to elbow length, doesn't it, no hand.

EK: Yeah

AS: You call it your lucky fin? Do you feel a benefit in some way to have been born with that disability rather than losing that hand in an accident through illness.

EK: I do and I don't because for one when it comes to swimming specifically being a competitor, I've noticed that the athletes who have lost their limbs seem to be better in the water it's just the biomechanic makeup or something. They seem to understand the strokes better than those who were born without their limbs, but then when it comes to like learning how to do things, I don't need to really adapt much because I've always had to find another way of doing things so if I struggle to do something I don't really get too flustered about it, another reason a bit of a weird, weird thing to say but it's hard when you're a kid and you're born with your disability because you don't really have a story. I just say I was born like this. It's not as interesting than like, I was in a shark attack or I was in an accident. it's harder for people to understand that sometimes people are born this way and I find it especially harder talking to kids about it when I was young my mum would have always said oh God made you that way and that's not really something that you can say because you don't know people's backgrounds and at the same time I be quite aware what do I say not to kind of scar the kid or to scare the kid so there are pros and cons but honestly I don't know where I'd be today if I was born with two hands. I think I'd be a completely different person. I probably wouldn't be as healthy as I am.



AS: I know exactly what you mean. I'm similar to you. I was actually born with no hands. I've been lucky that I've been able to get on with things that I want to do. I've read that you don't consider yourself to be disabled. What do you mean by that?

EK: I think word disabled is are really hard harsh word. It's a thing that I found really really hard to associate with for so long because when people are thinking disabilities, they think of things that you can't do, like it's an automatic negative thing so it's a word that like I struggle to own. I think in recent years, I've decided to own bit more because there is people like me who need me to own it or there's people who are worse off than the me that need me to own it. But it's society that makes people disabled, so there aren't many things that I can't do because I can kind of adapt whereas people who need access via a wheelchair or a ramp or like visually impaired just society hasn't designed things around them, what environment you live in is really dictating how disabled you are.

AS: Yeah, it's a difficult area, isn't it. I've found myself. Sometimes I find myself thinking or saying things that actually ruffle feathers with other disabled people. Even my question to you there saying that you sometimes don't see yourself to be disabled. There might be some people with disabilities who hear that and say you should be proud of having a disability rather than saying you don't have one. I have a great deal of sympathy with your perspective. How do you feel about that, people thinking Ellen shouldn't be talking about not having a disability, she should be saying proudly that she does have one.

EK: I Do proudly say it now, but like I think I'm in such a privileged position where I don't really have to second-guess things when I go out, like I don't need the blue badge for parking. I don't need to be closer to a building

AS: Let's talk about swimming. How did you settle on swimming as a sport that you were going to take up. Were you approaching swimming as a child like your friends as an able bodied person swimming.

EK: Yeah, so because I was born like this my parents thankfully made the decision as soon as I was born not to treat me any differently so when my brother and my sister were learning how to swim I went to lessons too so I was really on when happened. My dad was aware of the Paralympics so he got in contact with the manager of the Paralympic swimming team at the time and her daughter had the same arm as me and she invited me to Northern Ireland for a competition to see if I enjoyed it and literally I went and I just loved the control. I loved being competitive. It turns out I was pretty talented at it. So that's kind of how it began and I was probably about seven.

AS: Your progress was whirlwind to say the least because you competed in Beijing at just 13. You were suddenly Ireland's youngest ever Paralympian. I mean I was thinking when I was 13 I was struggling to keep up with my homework or score a goal at lunch time in the playground playing football, but you were a Paralympic athlete. How was it being a Paralympian at that young age?

EK: I was still struggling with doing my homework. It's mad like when I look back on it now. I didn't fully appreciate it at the time how bizarre it was being that young at a Paralympic Games because no one treated me any differently. The only difference



between me and any of the other athletes was that I had a chaperone. But all the athletes themselves treated me like an athlete. I wasn't really overwhelmed by it or anything like that. The only time I remember being kind of a bit afraid or overwhelmed was I think was at my first or second race. I think it was my second race and I was in the same heat as Nathalie Du Toit and Nathalie Du Toit was like my idol like she had just completed in Beijing Olympics as well as Paralympics and she was like twice the size of me and here's just me, the little tiny yolk. That's the only time I remember feeling my age, Things just don't affect you as much as when you're young cause you're just kind of living in the moment and you don't worry about things and I think that's something that I wish I still had.

AS: I do want to talk to you about role models. It's interesting you mentioned Nathalie Du Toit. What was it about her that you looked up to particularly?

EK: It was just because she was a disabled person who had been to the Olympic Games and she just stood for all things elite athlete, like no one ever looked at her and saw her as disabled. They saw her as a scary insane competitor and that's that's the way I always saw her and even up until she retired I always had so much respect for her and I think it's something that I think all of us as Paralympians strive for is the respect of everyone else to see us as elite athletes and not just as people with disabilities.

AS: Did you ever get to meet her or tell her that you'd been hero worshipping her for so long.

EK: No, but I was always in the call room with her. I thought it would be a bit weird.

AS: Maybe you could drop her a line now after all these years.

EK: Thanks for being so cool.

AS: And what about you as a role model?

EK: I got verified on Instagram a few weeks ago and it was honestly such a high. because when you get that tick everything you do is more valid and I felt like I had more power over influencing people's perception of disabilities with that tick. So that's why I was so excited about that and I get really excited when I see you like things that my that sponsors do, like Allianz had a campaign in Ireland where I was on billboards all over the city and all over the over country, but I was also on the side of the Dublin bus and I was like this is so bizarre like where movies should be. I'm like I'm in everyone's face but like I love the fact that I never I never wanted it to be me like I never wanted to be that person but someone needed to be that person so it had to be me like I'm in such a privileged position with my sport that I do get media attention because of my sport and I have used that to my advantage to kind of get my arm and my body out there because like that's what I need. That's why I got myself so insecure because there was nobody like me to compare myself to so I just want to be that for someone else and even if it's not like if they don't have the same as me, it's seeing someone different seeing someone embrace their difference.

AS: We're going to make them cry now because we've got a second example.



There's a young Irish girl called Tate who played a younger version of you in an advert for Allianz. Let's listen to that advert now first of all.

Courage is deciding that if the world is going to stare, then why not give a good reason to. Proud to cover Ellen on all her journeys. Allianz, we cover courage.

So, you were in that advert and Tate played you in a flashback to a swimming meet. So, you met Tate. Tell us about her and how you've kept in touch with Tate?

EK: Yeah so first of all the or reason why that ad kind of happened is because I'm an Allianz ambassador and I've been I've had such a good relationship with Allianz for so many years and I had done my TED talk about my experience of my arm and how I decided to finally show my arm off and the guys in Allianz wanted to do something with that and found it very powerful. So they were like we want to make an ad about it and I was like yeah that sounds great and then they're just talking about how they'd a a flashback and they'd have a mini me and as soon as they said mini me, I said you're going to get someone with one arm and they were like oh my god we didn't even think of that. And I was like, that's like the one thing that I want. I want someone with the same arm as me cos otherwise like what's the point. I met her for the first time when we were doing a fitting a few days before the ad was she was quiet. but I was talking to her mum and her mum was like Tate has never met someone like her before and like she's being she's being bullied both physically and mentally and emotionally and when she said that I was, it hurt so much because I was so lucky. I was never bullied as a kid. No one ever like picked on me because of my arm. They probably picked on because I was a weird child rather than because of my arm.

AS: Why was that do you think? Why do you think you avoided being bullied for your arm?

EK: I think it's just where I grew up. I was fortunate enough to be in a really really lovely primary school and then the majority of the kids I went to the primary school with went to my secondary school, so I never had an issue. I was just so fortunate for how lovely everyone was and I think that can play such a big role in a kid's a kid's experience. So as I said she was bullied and I couldn't believe it because especially physically bullied over her arm was just an awful thing to hear and I had never been shown how to tie my laces. I just kind of it's something I was quite stubborn. I didn't want any help ever so it was something that I taught myself. I taught myself how to tie my hair up and all of these things and I showed her how to tie her laces and she'd never seen she never knew how to tie your laces before and I think Tate was either 12 or 13 when I met her and that was like hard to hear that like a 12 or 13 year old couldn't tie her laces and part of the filming for the ad I tie my hair up and the camera like Tate doesn't know how to tie her hair up. We're going to record this now, so we can show her and it was just little things like that it was so lovely to be able to do. But it's like it's not just me. It's not like I don't like taking credit for it. I think it's the fact that a company like Allianz and like all of my other sponsors, they decide to embrace the difference and they decided to show the world the difference and involve people with disabilities and when you do that, you make such a difference to the whole, to the community as a whole.



AS: And that's something, isn't it, that the International Paralympic Committee are trying to do more and more. It's not just a sports organisation. It's not just about organising these huge sports events. It's about changing perceptions of disabled people generally, isn't it? Before we move on from Tate, we actually do have a little surprise for you so listen to this.

EK: Oh god.

Tate: Hi Ellen. It's Tate. It just wanted to say that it was really nice meeting you and filming with you in Dublin. You such an inspiration, a role model to so many people. You told me to never give up. I'm working hard at my football and hopefully I'll play for my country as well some day.

AS: There we go, we've all gone now, we're all in bits now. Here's Tate aka mini you.

EK: Oh, it's so lovely.

AS: We'll all have to look out for her on the football field in the future.

EK: Yeah, yeah definitely she'll be playing for England.

AS: I read a story recently and I think it's on your social media about you meeting a nine year old girl in Australia? She's a little girl with an arm just like yours. She looks up to you. Tell us about meeting Gemma.

EK: That was one of the strangest kind of coincidences ever so her dad been following me for a while on Instagram and I went holidays after a championships last year to see my friends in Australia and I was saying in Sydney and he lived in Sydney and he messaged me and was like hi, I see you're in Sydney, is there any chance we could arrange a meet up so we met on Bondai beach me and her dad and then he was like. Oh, she's in the water. She doesn't know that you're here. She just lost it. She couldn't speak. She didn't know what to do and it was so it was such a nice feeling it was it was strange as well because she was actually doing a project in school on me for a few weeks and I was the first girl with the same arm as her that she had ever met and she was saying that she loves my Instagram when I'm having a bit of fun with my arm, so there's a picture of me in Dubai and there's a big statue of a hand and I just I'm posing with it just pretending that it's my hand and she was like I love how you are able to do all that and I was like yeah, that's the thing about it like we can we can just have fun with it whereas other people can't and then during lockdown as well her dad messaged me and said that she was kind of, they've noticed that she was starting to hide arm a bit so I actually Facetimed her and we had a chat and I told her how important it was not to hide her arm because that's what I did. I did it from such a young age and it was so hard once I kind of got into that routine of hiding my arm, it was very very hard to break out of. And it kind of broke my heart a little bit to know that she was doing it, but just being able to talk her through my experience why it's important embrace what makes her different and to embrace. It's your little magic thing that no one else has. It's what makes you different what and like nobody wants to be the same like being different seems to be in fashion these days, so roll with it, use it to your advantage.



AS: It's just an incredible story. You've got me there. I have a lump in my throat here. It's so good of you to stay in touch. How does it make you feel to think that Gemma and let's face it lots of other people around the world will be feeling that way towards you.

EK: I try I try not overthink to it too much. I try and just see us as equals because that is what we are in the only reason why people know who I am or people seem to look up to me as role models because I've decided to speak out about it and I've decided to kind of shove my arm in people's faces and make it impossible not to look at. So when it comes to kids reaching out or just wanting to talk like I always always want to talk to them and I always want to listen, obviously sport is hard and you have your good days and your bad days and it always seems to be when I'm having one of my bad days, that I'll have a message in my inbox and it will be like from a little kid or mum or something like and it will be just like a nice little reminder of like, this is why you're doing it.

AS: Let me just talk to you about body image because we were talking about Gemma in Australia and you learned that she was beginning to hide her arm and you were encouraging her not to do that because it's something that you did. I've read interviews with you where you talk about wearing baggy clothes and standing sideways on to people to hide your arm, but then you made a conscious decision, I think as a teenager to stop doing that. Why did you make that decision and how tough was it to kind of change those habits?

EK: So I am quite an outgoing person, I like to think. But when I was growing up, I became really introverted and I became I hated the fact that people were staring at me and it's an awful feeling to know that people aren't looking at you they're looking at your arm. They're looking at what's different about you and even some of them are giving you disgusted looks and when you're a kid growing up it's hard enough being self-conscious maybe about if you have bad skin or your hair but this is something that I can never ever change about myself, so the only solution that I could find was to hide my arm. So that's why I wore sleeves. That's why I always had something baggy on. I had perfected it to a T to make it appear that I had two hands and the main part of that was if I was quiet and if I was nearly invisible people wouldn't look at me as much so they wouldn't have enough time to investigate my arm or investigate the way I'm standing. so in order to be that quiet invisible girl I almost had to disappear. I was so unhappy and I was so like I'm going to get emotional now. I had just convinced myself of all of these like unworthy things in all of these like I just felt like I was so unworthy of love. I was just less of a person I was so afraid of not being good enough and I felt like I wasn't good enough. I felt like I had to try and blend in as much as possible and that nobody would accept me if they knew the real me but when I was swimming this is where sport came in when I was swimming, I didn't care. All I cared about was going fast and when I was with my swimming friends and I was in the pool and I was with my coach like I was just such a happy hyper girl. And I knew like I had a taste of what happiness felt like and I had a taste of what I was capable of so I kind of knew that I needed to make a change and I kinda knew that I needed to face the fear but it only took until I was 19 because when I was 19 I started university or college like we call it in Ireland and I thought it was a fresh start and like nobody would know me going into college. Nobody knew that I had two hands or one hand, like even the school that I finished secondary school, then I was in 6th year the final year and I was midway through 6th year and I was waiting for my



coach to come in and one of the boys that I had been friends with for two years was just standing talking to me and he was like what's wrong with your arm and I was like what do you mean what's at my on arm? And he was like did you break it something and I was like oh, no I just don't have an arm and he was so shocked like that that is how good I was at hiding it that I had convinced people I knew for years that I had two hands. And it was that expression that I was so afraid of, that reaction that I was so afraid of. It was awful to know that the way you are, the way your body looks can make someone that react like that and it's awful. So, when I when I started college, I knew nobody knew me and there wasn't a lie then. The lie didn't exist yet. So it was up to me to make sure that the lie didn't start because once the lie starts, it's very hard to get yourself out of that lie, so yeah, I just kind of went in and was like I have no arm la la la. This is so completely normal, like a complete like fake it till you make it scenario and it was really funny cos I did a culinary degree as well. So I actually couldn't afford to hide my arm because I was doing such a dangerous degree, that you kind of need to let people know you have one hand and like people looked at me or glanced me and they didn't care and that was just so reassuring and it just made me realise that it was all in my head.

AS: I think that we often build up people's reactions that they're going to be a lot worse than they actually are. I remember having a conversation with people, I built up that I couldn't ask for help and when I did ask for help, they were like why didn't you ask me to do this for you five years ago when we first met. I always knew you were going to need help with x, y or z. You should have just asked.

EK: Yeah, but it's also like you don't want people to think less of you.

AS: No, but it's interesting hearing you talk about clothes, because I said, I'm sort of similar to you in terms of my arms and I think looking back, I can probably track my confidence or my self-esteem by the length of my sleeves. When I was at school they were quite long like yours and looking back I was probably trying to look normal like you. But I do get a little bit of I do get a little bit of Imposter syndrome or I like I feel a bit of a fraud because like people see this really strong confident girl on all these billboards or all these ads or on all social media but at the same time like I conditioned myself from such a young age to think that I'm not good enough. So even though I am confident with my body, I still have a little bit of like work to do with the mental side of things because it's not a switch you don't just flick it and you learn to think you're the best thing ever and all of this. Like I still have my bad days, but it's not it's not like about my arm, but like sometimes when people are like you're so inspirational how do you do this but I am always like I feel like such a liar. Yes, I love my body and I love my arm but like I still I'm still struggling a little bit but I'm struggling because I struggled from young age, so that's why I'm like I try and stop it before it happens so other people.

I think there's a lot of modesty in there. I know you're breaking through to media work as well and presenting yourself and speaking to you now I can absolutely see you as a Tv presenter. Why is that world important to you. What's the significance of having more disabled people on television.

EK: Well, it's just so important for representation because like disability can happen to anyone at any point in their life. It's the one thing that everyone in the world can be



affected by and it's the one thing that we don't see and we hide, shy away from and it's the one thing we look down and even when it comes to like other things like having more women in the workplace or different races or things like that, it's never let's make things accessible. The more you see of something the less of a big deal it is and the less scary it is so like it's heartbreaking to know like that when a baby is born without an arm, parents are terrified and they're afraid that the kid is going to have a bad life and they're afraid that the kid isn't going to grow up to be successful and that the kid is going to struggle, but if it's something that you see all the time then you're not going to be worried about it. Like it shouldn't be something to be worried about it's just something you adapt to and you live with and it's something you embrace.

AS: How are you embracing life in your preparations for Tokyo?

EK: I realise this more about enjoying the everyday and when you enjoy the everyday and you give your all every session then when it comes to the games that's when you're at your gonna be so chill, you're gonna enjoy it, perform well because you've embraced every single day and the journey, so that's what I'm doing at the moment. I'm so I can't wait. I think especially was in the world and the past year it's going to be a Games where everyone is going to be celebrating what the human body can do whether the Olympics or the Paralympics it's just be such as celebration of life.

AS: Absolutely, well I look forward to hopefully trying to meet you in Tokyo if not before. It sounds like Denny probably wants a walk now, so I should probably let you get on with your day. It's been a pleasure speaking with you Ellen and best of luck with everything you've got going on. You're a busy girl.