



Todd Hodgetts – A Winning Mindset: Lessons From The Paralympics

Andy Stevenson (AS): On his nickname The Hulk

Todd Hodgetts (TH): That Hulk nickname was funny! It was back at the local days in Tasmania and I used to drop the weights, I was pretty motivated and very serious at what I did. I've always taken my training seriously since I was 10. I was in my 20s when that (the nickname Hulk) happened and I was dropping these weights and scaring the ladies in the gym. This guy called Big Dave said 'we should call you The Hulk, like in wrestling!' and it stuck since then. I'm just like 'hey everyone, just call me The Hulk!' He (Hulk Hogan) used to take his shirt off and stuff and I used to do that in the gym when people annoyed me or thought they were stronger than me, I'd bite back and I'm a fighter.

AS: On his disability:

TH: When I was born I had the cord around my neck and that created issues so I nearly died at birth. It starved my oxygen to the brain. I've been working with a psychiatrist to navigate my impairment, I don't like to use the word disability. He said 'you've got to work on your strengths' so we're not looking at what I was born with, we're looking forward to the future. When you look at a dictionary, it says dis as a negative word. So I like to say impairment. It's more of an educational thing but that's just me, I like to have a more positive approach in life instead of just focusing on the disability. It should be focused on the ability of the person inside.

AS: On growing up with autism:

TH: (When I first realised I was different) was probably when the doctor told me that I was different. I didn't know that, I just thought I had ADD but no, I had something more extreme. I just thought I was normal. I was eight years of age. It wasn't great. It's like you've just jumped off a bridge or a cliff, one of the hardest days of my life. How am I going to get out of this situation and try and act as normal as possible? Then when I was 16 I said to the doctor, 'Am I cured yet?' because I had more tests when I was 16. He just laughed. I didn't really want this when I was born, I just wanted to be normal and live a normal life. My brothers and my family. They always stick together, they've got your back and proper families are like that. I've got a proper family. They've got their problems like everyone else, just a normal family.

AS: On finding shot put:

TH: It was at my brother's high school and he was a very funny man, he handcuffed his mate to a chair and forgot the keys. He used to do this kind of stuff just to be a clown and he thought giving me a shot put was funny. It wasn't, it changed my life! I had nothing in my life but this shot put in my life, that's all I had. I wasn't heading on the right path but I had some divine help, that's for sure. Things happen for a reason if you work hard and if you have the right person doing the right things. But it comes back to my education days. I had a really nasty teacher and this made me who I was. If I never picked up a shot put and she basically said I couldn't throw it right. She was probably right but I decided to train. All the Rocky movies and all the sport movies, it was bit like

that. When I picked up a shot put in my hand, it was like a sword. I'm here to protect people and save the world type of thing. I wasn't very good but I started to throw in my back yard and thought 'this is actually awesome! I'm good at something!' I was sick of people telling me I couldn't do things. I started to throw over the barbeque and fences, then two months later I broke my first record in little athletics in Australia back in the White City days in Tasmania. I basically got my certificate, everyone was giving me high fives in the class and the teacher was quite angry and put me in term suspension! That is a long story with a bully in it. Back then I never had any feelings and it all just used to come out. It was part of my autism and my ID at the time.

AS: On life with autism:

TH: To get out of bad habits now is very hard. If you're throwing with your arm of using your hips, that's another story because that takes years to do. Now it's getting out of bad habits in my general life, it takes a bit of effort and I really have to focus. If I don't focus I don't get the skill. I get frustrated but I have to keep on going. I've beaten people a lot stronger and bigger than me in the shot put. It's all about the skill and the technique, then there's the technical and the explosive speed aspect as well. It's all to do with motivation. Life's all about motivation and proving people wrong, doing it for the right reasons. I've always had the drive and the passion and my personality, I'm with a sports psychologist who works all on my strengths and not my weaknesses and navigating life in general, training. I'm still getting knockbacks now with the covid situation but he's really helping me with that situation and I'm grateful to have him on board at this stage. But he's answered all my questions about mental health. 'Why am I so honest, why do I react like this? What's the studies behind autism and ID?' he's very excellent.

I dish it back at people. I get pretty fired up at times but I've never got in big trouble but I just challenge it in the ring. When I'm training, never try and stop me. I'm there to do business and you get only one shot at life, which is Eminem and one of those motivational songs. When I was younger I used to flip out. And then it comes out when I get really angry, which hasn't happened for many years. In primary school I used to blow up a little bit. It was more verbal but back then people weren't educated on special needs I guess. This day and age, it has become a lot easier living with a learning impairment. Because the way I use these apps on my phone is just the way vision impaired people do. A vision impaired athlete showed me all these apps on his phone, reading out emails and I was like 'woah, this is awesome!' I'm learning off these guys, y'know? The way I talk is straight up - I'm pretty honest. And if I don't like you, I'll tell you! I'm working on that, it's an uphill battle. When I'm trying to write things down, I can't do that. I can't add things up, it gets overwhelming and I lose concentration and then when I'm in a test type of situation like at high school, I'd go to pieces. I used to get anxiety because I don't know the answer, I'm starting to freak out. If you throw a lot of instructions at me, I start to panic a bit if I don't know something. I don't drink coffee because of my heart as well. I try and steer clear from caffeine because it just makes me more amped up. I'm 32 and I'm still learning about life. It's just a never ending cycle. I'm learning more now than I was at school.

AS: On the things in his life autism impacts:

TH: When I'm learning a new skill with say cooking for example, it took me many years to learn how to cook. I used to have tinned food for breakfast, lunch and tea. I used to burn

things, just the learning aspect of things takes me 10x as long as an able bodied person. I have to really train my mind to overcome things. But I'm more focused and once I get that, it stays with me. It's like a gift, it's not like a disability, it's a disability. I've got some coping strategies with that if that makes sense.

Not everything stays. Like my writing, I can't write. I can't spell, can't add up, but I use my phone for everything and when I do my maths at school, I'd use a voice activation device. On my phone, when I'm texting, I'm using a voice activation system. Safari for example. They're the programs I use to do my communications with people. When I'm reading emails I convert text to speech. I'm using my knowledge, using my abilities to understand, survive in this world and cope.

I don't carry cash, I just put everything on card because I can't carry the money. Numbers confuse me, I can't really add up. I have to put everything through my phone to navigate! I get lost pretty easily, sometimes I don't speak English very properly. But communication issues I struggle with, relating to people. And if you talk negatively to me, I get a bit anxious so I think people are having a go at me all the time but they're not, they're joking. I do joke around but sometimes if you're strange, I don't know if you're joking or not. It depends who you are.

AS: On progression:

TH: The world is progressing and we are a blessed generation I guess. Everyone is getting more equal in life. Just because you're born with an impairment, and nobody is perfect in this life, but I strongly believe that everyone is here for a purpose. And everyone is here on their own journey. You do get people like that (abuse) but I just ignore them. I'm wearing my Australian colours, I'm doing what I have to do and I don't listen to what people say if it's very negative. I'm starting to get mentally stronger.

AS: On opening up about autism:

TH: I don't really talk about my mental illness with anyone really. I try and live a normal life and all I wanted to do since being diagnosed with autism is be normal. I'm trying to live as normal a life as possible. It's a shock to your system when they tell your mum that their life is never going to be the same again. But I just live a normal life, do you know what I mean? I can't change, I can't get cured. There's no cure for the thing I have, I'm born with it until I die. I'm just trying to live my life I guess. If they're not getting what I'm saying I say I've got mental health issues and anxiety. And people understand when I say that. 'Oh yeah, cool'. The majority of the people are positive I guess.

AS: On Films:

TH: I look up to Stallone, he's my favourite actor. And Rocky IV was my favourite movie. After Rocky V it all went downhill, they just ruined the story! To me, there's only four Rocky's. Creed Two wasn't bad. There should have been five, he should have been world champion and that was it! He should have beaten Tommy Gunn and knocked him out, it would have been a fairytale ending, just leave it like that. It's like Terminator movies too.

There's only two Terminator's really. I won't be taking up boxing though. I need to get a job I guess! All I've done in my life is train my backside off to prove a lot of knockers on, and won some hearts on the way I guess.

AS: On Tokyo 2020:

TH: Hopefully there is a Games! I've gotta get picked in the team first. Even at my start I've always taken it one step of the day. I think about eating before I'm throwing, that type of thing. If I get my technique right then who knows. I've made a vow that I'm going to retire at 40 years of age. So win, lose or draw, that's what I'm gonna do. I've still got another eight years. They're the goals.

AS: On who he is:

TH: I've travelled around the world. I went to London to Rio, to South America, to America. I've been at all these places. A local boy from Tasmania who never had anything in life because people said I had a few learning difficulties, becomes an undisputed champion of the world. It's an awesome feeling and I was very lucky to be alive. The person who had a chord around their neck and nearly died when they were born has done pretty well.