



## **Manuela Schar: A Winning Mindset**

**Andy Stevenson: So Manuela, where are you joining us from today?**

**Manuela Schar:** I'm here in ... in Switzerland

**AS: And where was it you grew up in Switzerland?**

**MS:** Yeah it's like 25 just next to Lucerne.

**AS: So I'm imagining mountains, lakes, cowbells.**

**MS:** Exactly!

**AS: It sounds an idyllic place to grow up. What was it like being a child and growing up in such a beautiful area?**

**MS:** It's amazing. As a child you can spend most of the time outside, playing with other kids. It's really beautiful, but you don't really appreciate it as much as a child because you don't get to travel and then once you get to see other places, you always enjoy coming back to the beautiful views and fresh air. I really love it here.

**AS: It sounds lovely as I look out of my window at a very grey British day. And as an adult, a lovely place to train?**

**MS:** Our training base is pretty much in Nottwil. I leave my racing chair and everything there and travel everyday which is a 25-minute drive. I do most of my training on the track but then also possible to go on the roads and just come there.

**AS: We're obviously going to talk about your career and what people listening might be able to learn, but I just want to ask about your disability. It was because of a playground accident wasn't it when you were eight, that left you paralysed. Can you explain the accident?**

**MS:** It happened at my friend's birthday party. We played in the garden and they had a swing built on their own and it wasn't deep up in the ground. So seven of us played on it and it just fell down and it hit me on my back, and that's how it happened. It was just me, the other kids were able to jump away and yeah. I

remember pretty much everything well. It's funny that I don't really remember what happened before, before the accident, but then from the accident until I was at the hospital, I remember everything.

**AS: That's quite unusual that you remember everything from the point of the accident onwards.**

**MS:** When I talk to my friend sometimes. I realise that I remember so many things from when I really little. Some of my friends don't have any memories of their childhood but I remember so many things.

**AS: And what was it like to have so many things in your life change so suddenly and violently?**

**MS:** It was definitely the most difficult time of my life. Of course it not only changed my life but also my whole family's life. Life as a child it was difficult to to be at a hospital for so long. I spent their there 6-months and I know I was homesick and didn't feel well, I just wanted to be home. I missed my friends of course and that's just the one side and the other side of course is just know that your body changes and you have to learn what happened to your body. What will be and how you have to take care of it and get back into a normal life and that's took many years.

**AS: I'm interested in the idea that this happened it all happened surrounded to you by your friends. You come back and you're the same person of course, but your body is different.**

**MS:** It was very difficult for me to come back. Also you are centre of attention. When I grow up, it's really small town. Then everybody knows my parents everybody knew me, they knew about my accident, and then coming back after 6-months, everyone stares at you and feels like, uncomfortable That was really really difficult it was a tough time. And also I changed a lot in that 6 months so I had to find a new role. Yeah, a new role inside my friends. That took me a long time .

**AS: Yeah a support team makes all the difference. Would you say becoming paralysed forced you to mature more quickly?**

**MS:** Oh yeah, I had to. You have to get to know your body in a different way because as a child, you think nothing's going to happen to you, it's that naivety. Suddenly your whole world just falls apart and everyone around you that that is

supposed to be strong for you, like even your parents, they're totally helpless and overwhelmed so yeah, you have to grow up a little bit and take responsibility.

**AS: Were you able to return to the same town, same house, same friends?**

**MS:** Yeah I was lucky. I had a really nice teacher and he did everything to, you know, to keep me on the same level as my schoolmates. He brought me school homework and stuff like that so I was able to return to the same class and to the same house, but it wasn't wheelchair accessible so my parents had to carry me every day when I tried to leave the house. We moved a year after.

**AS: Speaking to previous guests on this series and from my own life, it's so important and significant when you have the right people around you. Not everybody has that, do they? It's so important to have them and get on with life.**

**MS:** That's why not everyone takes the same path you know because sometimes people ask me, 'What would you say to someone who just got injured?' and its so hard to tell because everyone has a different background, everyone comes from a different point of life. So it's really important to have a good network and good people around you.

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**AS: You found wheelchair racing. Did you love it straight away?**

**MS:** I actually met my first coach when I was still at the hospital. We had a nice group of wheelchair athletes who train in Nottwil as well, legends like Heinz Frei. I was really lucky to meet them when I was still in the hospital. A while after I got home, they came to my home and give me the possibility to try wheelchair and racing chair and everything, so I kind of grew into it like very slowly. I used to be a runner before my accident so athletics was always a part of me, so I think at first it was just to be included in that group of people, and included in that group of people who are happy and nice and funny and didn't treat me like a different

person. I felt really comfortable and really safe there. That's probably why I picked wheelchair racing.

**AS: That's so true. People take up sport almost for the social aspect or teamwork, not to be an international athlete. But you have! We're going to speak to you about performance and managing it, how you've kept those levels so high. To put all that into context, I'm going to run through your role of honour. (Andy runs through achievements). Were you somebody setting goals on a regular basis or was it the start of every year?**

**MS:** It was pretty much every season because most track events take place in summer. So yeah, I would work during the winter time and early in the year to beat my time from last year.

**AS: And what would happen when you wouldn't reach those targets?**

**MS:** You know I only had that really big time in London and Rio. I think as an athlete, it's really important how you deal with disappointment also, because it's gonna be a part of your life - no matter what. You can turn bad experiences or not reaching a goal into something really good, or it can go in a really bad way. I think I somehow turned it into something good and took it as a teacher or a motivation to grow. You learn from every mistake, so it's really important to not ignore those moments and keep on going, so you have to really analyse and take to take something out of it that helps you.

**AS: I mentioned about rivals but you also had a significant teammate and friend and that's Marcel Hug. Here's a little message from him**

**Marcel Hug:** We also a great development in our personalities and our sports. Progress since 2016 was fantastic. Breaking WR in 1500m this year despite difficulties of covid was stunning. I hope she can keep going and stay healthy and I'm absolutely sure she will win gold at the Paralympics un Tokyo

**AS: The switch you talked about was from the short distances to the long distances and the marathons out on the road. People may change their job away from sport, go into a different career path and there's a lot to think about when you choose to do it. What was on your mind when you made the decision to focus on longer distance races?**

**MS:** Different reasons why I took that step. They cancelled the 200m for the Paralympic Games, so that was one of my favourite distances. And then I just realised that as an athlete in 100m, it's really it's really hard. Because we race against amputees and athletes who have more upper body ability and in 100m, it's really hard to keep up with those athletes. So that was the other reason. Also

I got older and realised it's easier to train for the longer distances because then it's just a question of training. When younger you have that fast muscle.

**AS: Marathon training must completely take over your life?**

**MS:** Yes! It's great and I love it. It was the right time to do so. I've been racing for so many years and then just have to have a change and it was not the only thing I changed, I also started working with different people, I changed my material my racing chair and everything. It felt a bit like a new chapter, a new episode. So it was just the time.

**AS: Does marathon training involve a lot of extra things you didn't have to think so much about the shorter distances? I'm thinking about nutrition, physio, massage, the whole thing. It feels like training for a marathon must take every hour of every day.**

**MS:** Yes. I still have a lot of track training even at shorter distances, because it helps me for the marathon a lot. And it's really important to mention that because it's a really big difference. You still need that fast ability in marathons because of the attacks and the hills and the sprint finishes. You still need that go faster part of racing. But also yeah, I had to change a lot and had to learn a lot because marathon racing is different. You only have that one one day. You travel to Asia or to US or wherever and only have that one competition. It's also you know it's colder, the colder weather. It's raining, it's windy. It's so much harder. I like that challenge.

**AS: You mentioned your coach Claudio Perret. What's his role? I know in some ways it's an obvious question, but what role does he play for you?**

He knows so much like he's such a smart person. He's the head or the brain behind my training or my arms. He does all the training planning, season planning. It's really, really helpful to have a person in your team that knows so many things and is so motivated to make you stronger and faster. It's really fun to work with those people.

**AS: Why didn't you want a day off initially?**

**MS:** So I'm like 'no, why not training or just one session' but he really wanted me to actually do that. So just a few weeks later, I thanked him so much because it's so important to have that one day a week and it's all that one day. People ask 'but what do you do if you see Thursday it's going to rain and Friday will be beautiful?' But no, Friday is my day off. It's just a lot of me time. Whatever I feel

like. Sometimes I go out with my dog for a walk, sometimes I just stay home or go to the city. I listen to audiobook, whatever.

**AS: And he mentioned a 70 minute endurance session. What would that involve? Is that a hard session?**

**MS:** You know it's not a hard work out. It's just a 70 Minutes or even 90 minutes, rolling. And I never had before in my life.

**AS: I love how you say it's not a hard work out. 70-90 minutes on rollers is the equivalent to a treadmill, isn't it?**

**MS:** Yeah it's like running on a treadmill. Mentally it's so 'eugh'

**AS: All in one go? Full speed?**

**MS:** It's actually an easy speed, not a high level push. So yeah, but doesn't make it easier. It's just the time. It's 90 minutes and it doesn't pass.

**AS: It's interesting hearing him and highlights that crucial relationship between athlete and coach. Like a mum and dad or wife and husband. You have to be completely in tune with each other.**

**MS:** Yeah and I think it's really important that you learn to speak the same language. It took us a while until he knew what it meant when I said 'I'm tired' and that's really important that he knows you know where to put that, you know, that feeling of me. He knows me so well that he knows that when I'm tired before I even know it, it's so really impressive.

**AS: What kind of feedback do you respond to best?**

I have to feedback him on every training. I give it a number and then he has a system, he gets a line with numbers and he now he knows where to put this compared to other.

**AS: So you give him a score to say how well the session went?**

**MS:** More like how hard it was. It's out of 10.

**AS: Are they all 10s?**

**MS:** I actually only put it 10 once. It was after my first New York City Marathon. And then all the 7s and 8s became a total new meaning. My first New York City Marathon changed my whole perceptions of this number.,

**AS:** And he writes it down and keeps it. That's incredible.

**AS:** What does he do with these scores? Does he look at a week and see some 8s, so he'll be slightly easier, or would he give you then four 9 sessions?

**MS:** He usually gives me three weeks, so we do a hard, middle and easy week. My feedback is more like deciding if it's working or if it's not working. So you know we have the season planning and of course you know the date of important competition. So you take that date and do planning of your training of course.

**AS:** Is he quite tough with you or soft on you? What approach do you like best?

**MS:** He's not a mean coach, but of course I have a way to tell him my goals, that's why he told me once that it's not when I come up to him and say, 'Hey, I want to do a world record in 1500m in May this year.' I think I make it sound 'please, could you please make this happen?' So that's how we challenge each other and since I'm very demanding, I'm willing to work hard. We both want to go in the same direction. It's not that he tries to torture me, you know, I do it for myself. I'm not doing it for him.

**AS:** It's obvious you can challenge each other, he just doesn't tell you what to do. You can talk back, debate and agree together.

**MS:** Oh, yeah, I mean I know the training planning and all that stuff, like the head stuff, the brain stuff...that's his expertise. It's his job and I'm here for the training and the work. We both know what we are best at so that works pretty well. He does his job, I do mine.

**AS:** And do you think these principles - either the scoring or his general approach - can it be applied to somebody in an office or different kind of workplace ?

**MS:** Yeah like I said I think it's really important that you speak the same language and I think communication is so important. So many things can go wrong if you don't communicate. So, I think that's everywhere. It's all in the

family. It's in a work situation or relationship, in training in sports. It's everywhere. I think you just have to talk and to communicate, say what you want then see what's possible and get the feedback.

**AS: Yeah I absolutely do and I'm not an athlete but can think of situations in my work when actually a bit of good communication has been a great solution to a problem. In sport your achievements are measurable by your results. Do you reward yourself for good performances?**

**MS:** Yeah, mostly with food. It's so important to celebrate, to enjoy the good moments in life. I had years, especially when I just started to work with Claudio in 2013-14. I had goals where I wanted to win so bad and I was the second, and then I realised, you just have to also enjoy the good moments. And the things that you have achieved because the season is, you know, we come back from Boston and two days later we travel to London and it's just everything is happening so so so so fast. It's really a shame when you forget to celebrate and when you forget to to enjoy the Moments that you actually worked for and I really try very hard to save that positive feeling for later. It will be over one day and I want to remember everything.

**AS: Those moments of celebration and the Fridays to yourself, they're all part of recovery and stop you burning out.**

**MS:** Yes, it's important to have those moments. Not just physically but mentally. Sometimes it's tiring, all the pressure. The travelling.

**AS: And just feeling you have to win all the time is quite tiring.**

**MS:** Actually 2019 was the toughest year so far. Even though everything went so perfect and so good for me. I was really, really tired.

**AS: And that was your most successful season. Do you work with any psychologists or is it you and Claudio and family?**

**MS:** I started working with a mental coach a few months ago actually, last year. I saved it for many years. One thing was that I didn't really think I need it so much, another was I wanted to save it for a really important year like 2020 - well, now 21, I felt like had so many other things to work on. I didn't want to work on a million because then you don't see what helps you the most so yeah, I work with someone. I think it's an interesting part of being an athlete.



**AS: What would you say the secrets are to the fact you've been able to stay at the top for so long? How have you kept your performance levels at the same height as 20 years ago?**

**MS:** There's no secret. It's such a big puzzle and so many small pieces that have to fit together. It was a long time until I had the perfect environment for me to train. It means you know the perfect chair, perfect coach, perfect life. I had to work when I was younger because I had to make my own for living, and also your body has to be willing to do that. It's a lot that we ask our bodies to deliver and it's not to be taken for granted that you can do that for such a long time without having bigger injuries or physical problems.

**AS: The theme of this episode is performance management. How long do you see yourself competing for?**

**MS:** It's a really good question. I'm not getting any younger so it's in my mind a lot. I need to have a plan and don't feel comfortable ending without having another thing in the pipeline. It'll be a process and my feeling will tell me when it's the right time. Maybe when another door opens is when I have the feeling to actually let that one go or maybe it's me deciding until then. But I have no fixed plans yet. It's in progress.

**AS: This sport consumes your whole life. You're happy with training, with it dominating. Do you think what you'll do when you can't race anymore?**

**MS:** Yes, a lot. I can imagine different things within sports like coaching or the federation, or I could imagine doing something totally different. I hope it's going to be as exciting as being an athlete because we're really lucky to live that life.

**AS: But are there things you could take from your sporting career and apply to that next career?**

**MS:** I learned so many things. It's such a good life teacher and you learn so many values. If you work, you get something back. Following rules, you can't do whatever you want. It's important to be fair and respect people and also how to live with a passion. It's just great to do something so important to you and gives you so much back. People look for their whole life to find something like that.

**AS: What about Winter Paralympics?**

**MS:** Oh no! I do ski sometimes with a bad feeling because I don't want to hurt my shoulder, but I do enjoy alpine skiing but I don't feel comfortable in the snow. I

prefer the warmer weather and with a wheelchair in the snow, it's just eugh. It's not for me.