



Markus Rehm (Breaking Barriers) on A Winning Mindset

Andy Stevenson: Hi Markus. We spoke to each other back in the spring didn't we and here we are all these months later. Is your life still affected by various restrictions, or is it lightly back to normal again?

Markus Rehm: Well it's kind of an up-and-down still there are some restrictions, but so far, it's going well. We have a lockdown light here, but we, the professional athletes are allowed to train, so at least I can keep my daily routine. I'm building training back up to where it was back in February/March. We started all over again. I mean we have our focus for the next year. It's clear, it's the same goal. I think it's going well so far and yeah, I'm happy to be back in.

When I was preparing for this interview. I was thinking about the barriers you've broken, all the boundaries you've pushed, so we're going to focus on that sense of continually improving and doing things that nobody has done before. But first of all just the context. I'd like you to tell the story of how you lost your lower leg.

Yeah, well my story started in 2003. I was always a sporty a child. I loved sports and I also did athletics at that time. I was with my family on holiday. We were here in Germany and we had a caravan with a motor boat and we always loved doing watersports. During summer holiday, we had a good time there and one evening I asked my dad to have another wakeboard session on the river, so he agreed. I invited some friends and family. We went to the water and during wakeboarding try to jump on the on the waves of the motorboat and you try to make jumps and do some tricks also I did that time. I was 14 years old and yeah, during one jump by I lost balance, I fell into the water and yeah, there was a random motorboat coming straight towards me and well, I had a life jacket on and a wakeboard on my feet so I couldn't swim away, I couldn't dive and yes, it has got me and I went with my both legs to the engine of the motorboat.

I mean clearly a very traumatic experience of something happening very suddenly and very violently like that really. How did you and your family cope with that trauma both at the time in the short-term and then the months and years later.

At the very first nobody really knew how to deal with situation. I came to the hospital. They did surgery on me and tried to keep the leg. But three days after,

my parents had to make the decision to amputate and I think it was the toughest decision for my family. For me to be honest of course it was a shock to hear about it. My mum told me what they are planning to do but to be honest it wasn't a huge surprise because I kind of knew that must happen because I've seen everything that happened and I was always conscious. So I knew it can't go well if they if they leave it there, so the surprise wasn't too big. But of course the shock when you wake up again. It was it was massive. I think everybody can understand if they get up in the morning. If you look down on the bed, and you know, the duvet is filled with your legs until the end of the bed. And that they was different because they were flat on the mattress. So that was the moment I realised that really happened. And yeah the beginning was tough, but slowly we came back to normal. I always planned to do the same that I did before my accident and I think nobody was really sure if I'm able to do that, but I proved every day that I am exactly same person as I was before and I can do at least the same things I could do before. So it was easier for my family for my friends and all the people round to deal with it because they saw I was good with it.

And I guess one key part of getting back to what you were doing before and getting back to what you might call normal is getting back involved in sports. How quickly did that happen after your accident?

It basically started at the hospital. I had really good friends and they brought me so many wakeboard videos, surf videos. I love this stuff. The neighbour in my bedroom, he was so pissed. I watched all day long these fun sport videos and yeah, but this was his already when I knew I want to be back on the waves, go back on the waves. The next year I'll be snowboarding in winter, I had exactly the same things and making a new start for me. Of course there were some up and downs and after I had, obviously like everybody else also my downs. But I knew straight I wanted to be back on the wakeboard for next summer and going on to the waves again. So yeah, it started that time and then I proved to myself everyday. Once I came back from my rehabilitation from a physiotherapy. I jumped on the bike. My parents were scared to put me back on my bike. I caught my dad finding alternatives for doing snowboarding on the computer. I caught him and just said 'what are you doing?' He was looking for alternatives and I said, 'dad I'm going back on the snowboard!' It may not work as it did before but find a solution for it again. I tried everything I did before and I said to myself 'maybe it's not exactly same as it was before, but even if not I will find a solution and how to make it still possible'. It was one of the biggest things that helped me at that time.

For people who don't know, you're an athletic superstar in the Paralympic world and actually you know, trying to get into the Olympic world as well,

which we'll talk about a bit later. But you're known as the blade jumper. The length of your blades rival and actually exceed not only your Paralympic rivals but also your able body counterparts in lots of cases. And just to put your achievements in context with people, your jump of 8.4 m in Doha at the world para Athletics Championships in 2015, would have won the Olympic title in Athens Beijing and London. And then your jump of 8.21m at the Rio Paralympics would have also won the Olympic title that year too. So when you started out using a blade, a running blade, did you ever imagine you'd be jumping that far?

I never dreamed of it. I loved jumping when I was a child already when had I two legs back then, and then suddenly I came to Para Sport and I didn't hear much about it. At the beginning I didn't know much of disabled sport but I didn't feel disabled. But so many people prove you wrong and that's not true. We as a Paralympic family proved wrong so many people that had the wrong impression about our sport. That's my goal with what I'm doing. I started slowly. I started jumping, I don't know I think 5.50 the first time then 6, then 6.50. And I was the first athlete in my category jumping over seven. In London 2012 when I could win the title, there was a journalist asking me if I think it will be possible one day for an athlete to jump over 8 metres. I smiled and said 'yes, I think it's possible. It may not be me but I think it will be possible one day'. And well a few years after I was the one jumping eight metres first and yeah. I think we have a good way and we still have to prove to some people that our sport is at least interesting, the same exciting as Olympic sport. But I think we've got already so many people and I want to continue until we've informed the last person.

I mean what's fascinating is you work in prosthetics yourself which we'll also get onto in moment, but just taking you back to the 2003/2004, you're trying on your first artificial legs and then when you moved into athletics and trying your first blade potentially. I want to know how it that felt that first time you went from what I imagine was a fairly ordinary, if I can call it medical artificial leg, to something which is really designed purely for sporting achievement and speed and everything like that. What was that feeling when you first tried on a blade and used it?

I do remember really well, it was incredible. I came for first time to my sports club, which I'm still competing for and we spoke about doing sports and they asked 'why don't you try athletics?' I said 'I'd love to try, I just don't have a blade, you know, I don't have a running Blade.' And the same evening I got my first running blade and I carried it like I would carry my gold medal today. I was really careful It was Johan Frishman from my sports club and I said 'I can't take it. I know how much worth it is.' And he said 'yes you will, it's an investment in your future' These words, I will never forget and it was my start. I think everybody was running on

the blade the first time they know this feeling, just having the wind back in your face. It was incredible to be faster than I could be with a normal prosthesis. I could run again, I could sprint, I could jump on it, it was incredible. Even now I have to have to start smiling when I remember myself and bring myself back to this moment.

I mean you talk about your progression there 5/6/7m. The Doha jump was nearly up to eight and a half as an example, and I know this is a question you probably get tired of answering, but how much of your jumping ability is down to your body - your technique. How much is it down to the blade technology? I asked that because as we both know some people do slight on you and say it's all down to the blade in the same way they might say to Lewis Hamilton, it's all down to his car and not his driving skill in Formula 1.

Well that's of course always a big discussion. If you compare it like you just said with Formula One, if you somebody else in Lewis car they won't be far as fast as he is. He's just an amazing driver and so good, and I think it's the same with blade running or blade jumping. There's so many athletes and I also, that's my best argument. Well if it would be that easy, if you think it's really so easy to jump 8 or 8.5 with such a blade, then why is not everybody's jumping this distance? Why are they way more behind? There's a lot a training. There's a lot of sweat, pain wet paint behind it there's an athlete behind it. It's not just a case of putting on a blade and jumping 8.50, that is not possible. If you jump 6,7,7.50. Everything is good. But if you start challenging an able bodies athletes...I had an athlete at my sports club who would say 'OK well. Let's have a competition and I will give you one metre towards me. And suddenly I would become better and then it was 50 cm, and then it became 20. And this was the moment our contact was not that good anymore. It was a problem because you know losing against a Paralympic athlete, he couldn't deal with it. I just do my job as good as possible and I just don't agree that somebody reduces it to the blade because if it was, why is not everybody jumping eight metres plus?

How does it make you feel when people doubt your ability? They look at progression and say it's because of the blade?

The only ones who can judge my abilities or the correlation between blade and body are the people who see me training, running, laying on the ground. These people know it's not the blade. Usually people see me on the big events and say 'obviously his blade is giving him an advantage. But they don't see how I work out here. It's really a shame and at the start, it got me emotional because what did I do wrong? I never planned to have an advantage, I just wanted to replace what I had lost. I said when the competition came up about competing with able

bodies, let's make a study. Let's research because I don't want an advantage. I don't want to be 60 and sit in front of my TV watching the Olympic Games and thinking 'oh God Markus you did something wrong, that's all my fault.' And I don't want to take anything away from Olympic athletes, I just would love to compete together. It's why I'm open to any study and it's why I did studies. Three researchers from three continents tried to find out if it's an advantage and they couldn't find anything. I can't do more, I just try to stay open and hope to try and find out.

There was also a study at the University of Koln where they said your prosthetic is a disadvantage in the run up, advantageous in the launch but not advantage overall. So as you say, you have science and research backing up your defence, which seems wrong to call it because you shouldn't have to defend yourself. Do you think it's a wider point that sometimes society is okay with disabled people as long as they stay over there? If they come out of their lane, that's when society turns against them?

Exactly, that's the point. In my case and you kind of mentioned at the beginning, I like being blade jumper. It's easier to use against the blade jumper than lose against an amputee or a disabled person. These are all negative words. Nobody as a strong, young guy wants to lose to a handicapped guy, so I like to play with the words. Losing against a handicapped person is really bad? I like to compare it to Germany with football. Many people made jokes for many years about the female football, which is not true. They are professional athletes and they are really, really good. But if you would go back to your buddies and say 'I lost to a few women', they would tell you it can't be like that. But if you say 'I lost to professionals', that is suddenly fine. It's still the same team, but it's okay to lose to professionals but now women. So I like to play with the words and make people feel a bit more comfortable. It's really a problem with this acceptance and there's a limit at some point. I want to change this limit because it's not right.

And is that why you feel it's important to try and compete in the Olympics? Why not just the Paralympics?

For me the main reason is the Olympic Games have a larger platform. People are more interested in it and I want to change it. I would like to perform at the Olympic Games, not because I want to be an Olympic athlete, I am a Paralympic athlete and I'm proud of it. I'm a Proud Paralympian. I want to compete at the Olympic Games to prove that it's worth getting some tickets for our events, that it's worth watching our events. We have the same results as Olympic athletes and we've proved that we can be even better sometimes. Look through all the athletes, there are so many great stories. I get goosebumps sometimes when I

see a person playing table tennis with the racket in their mouth. This is in London, I remember thinking 'what the hell? That's incredible' and I got inspired. But I always said I want to compete at the Olympics, but I don't want to be in the rankings. I don't want to win a medal there. I win my medal at the Paralympic Games, it's my competition. But I would love to just compete and advertise for the Paralympic sports.

With that in mind, I'm looking at the able bodied world long jump record and it takes me back. I was 10 years old and I remember watching an epic battle between Mike Powell and Carl Lewis at the Championships in 1991. Mike Powell came out on top and his longest jump was 8.95m. Your Paralympic record is 8.4m. How much further do you think you can jump and is a 9m jump within your reach or any human being's reach?

Well, if you could see me now, I'm smiling! That's the direction I'm looking at. My next barrier is the 8.50 which separates the good from the very best. Of course I want to be one of the very best and it is my next goal. 8.95 is incredible and I love watching the videos from that time. Although it's not the best quality, it's just incredible competition. But I still think that maybe something is coming. In March I was in great shape in South Africa at a training camp, really good session. At this moment I felt there was some more in it. This season didn't go as we planned it but I keep working, I keep training and I think there is still something possible because I had a few jumps, unfortunately faults or before the board, where the distances went well. But 8.50 is possible. It's a lot of work but let's see. With the right conditions, maybe this big mark will fall.

Just one more question about distances and then we'll move on to wider topics. If you do continue to jump further and further, do you think that will improve or reduce your chances of getting into the Olympics?

Well it would not improve my chances, that's for sure! But I don't mind. I just give my best everyday and I don't mind what other people think. People thought I can't run, I can't play soccer, I can't be on a snowboard. I'm just tired of explaining myself. I do what I do as good as possible. Yes I still try to compete in able bodied competitions and I don't know the outcome of it, but if we talk about it, there is something to improve and even if I can't compete at the Olympics, I hope there will be a moment after I retire where this will be normal and open, more connected. I dream the Olympic and Paralympics are closer together. Not one event but I would like to come closer and not end the Olympic Games and start the Paralympic Games. We just keep going, now it's the Paralympics, the competitions are going further. That's my dream, that we are connected more. A competition between 4x100, different nations with two

Paralympic and two Olympic athletes, some symbolic race to connect these two great events.

Yes I know the IPC and the IOC are building closer bonds and it seems to fit in with the desire for increasing inclusivity. I think it's fascinating that outside of sport you work in prosthetics for your job. But how far do you think the world of prosthetics can go? What will the prosthetics of the near future look like?

Well that's a pretty good question. The design of the blade is changing but it didn't change too much, just the shape a bit. There will be one day when electronic is the subject and at that time, we have to decide how we want to build the rules, how open do we want to be to technology. This is a question we have to answer at some point and that moment will come. I don't think it's a question we have to answer yet but that moment will come when we have to ask ourselves how open we are to technology and how separate from sport. Blades are more or less the same, it depends on what fits best for you for your running style or your jumping style. For the moment it's very easy and all the blades we are using, they come from the industry so I can't use a prototype for myself. Someone told me once I could and I could things inside the blades and I just said 'guys, I just use any product that you use.' There's nothing inside, it's a basic blade. I offered to a journalist once, if they choose five athletes and five blades, they choose one and I take the one left if you don't believe me. At the end of the day he believed me and he came around to the workshop how it works and it's not rocket science, it's not that crazy...yet.

In every day life, people are wearing artificial limbs with microprocessors with knee joints, ankle joints that are working in a very electronic way. Presumably that kind of thing is going to continue and you're going to start to see artificial legs almost operating by themselves.

Yeah of course. This will happen one day. We are already quite good at what we're doing and to be honest, microprocessors in the knees or ankles are there today already, but in sport it's simple technique. We have mechanical blades, no electronic involved. Maybe one day it will come to that point and then we have to make the decision if we want to be open to tech or keep it simple in sport. It's a question we have to answer at some point.

In your work are you dealing with the patients face to face or is it more the construction and the research behind the scenes?

I work face to face with clients and it's what I like doing. It's less and less because I focus more on sport but I can't stop it completely because I love what

I'm doing. You visit people for the first time in hospital and then join them on their way. Maybe it's the first run on the blades, you help them back to life and there are great and emotional moments.

Do many standard out?

There are so many. One client couldn't stand on two feet for years and he decided to cut the leg. That's what they did, I built him a prosthesis and he stood up for the first time in many years on two feet. He started crying. This tattooed guy, tough, rocker style. He started crying because he was so happy and touched, I felt the same! I had a child seven years old who had an accident with a truck and lost both his legs. I met him in the hospital and if I see him now, he's doing everything. He walks on his two prosthesis, now he's started Paralympic swimming and it's just great to see the process.

But these stories must make you feel almost as good as winning medals?

Definitely. It is still great to win medals and at the start it was all about gold medals at the Paralympic Games and it's still the best thing to be on top of the podium, listening to your national anthem and getting the gold medal. But I had this moment in Rio. At some point during the competition, the first three attempts were horrible. I didn't know what was wrong. I knew it wasn't going well and I remembered this seven year old. His parents told me he was a big fan and he'd be watching my competitions, they'd record everything on TV. And I wanted to make him proud and be a good role model for him. I'm here to inspire and win medals, and show what to do in life. He doesn't get stopped by prosthetic legs. And now when I talk about it I get emotional because these are the people who make me happy in my job. When I came back, he drew a picture of me at the Paralympic Games and the first time after competition, he smiled at me and gave me a hug and said, 'Markus, I'm so proud of you.' I had to fight back the tears because that's maybe the greatest moment of the competition I ever had.

I like to think of the idea of this young lad being a Paralympian himself in a few years and you in the crowd.

Oh I'll be there. I'll be there.

The other thing that I'm sure has crossed your mind, and I'm smiling because it must be amazing to have patients turn up, and I'm sure most if not all of them recognise you as the German Paralympic hero, but you're their prosthetist or doctor essentially. There must be some funny occasions on that basis?

For sure. Three days ago, a young lady in the hospital lost her leg and I was there as a random technician talking to her and explaining everything. She knew I had a prosthetic leg but didn't know who I am. She told her dad about it and said 'there was a guy here who spoke about it and he asked, 'What's his name?' She said Markus and he just went, 'Markus? Markus Rehm? You didn't realise who he is?!' She wrote a funny text later saying she didn't realise. But when I'm there I'm not an athlete, I'm someone trying to get them back on their feet.

I think it's fantastic someone could have this penny dropping moment. Like in the films when somebody is drinking alcohol on a park bench and they do a double take to check what they're drinking, it makes me think of that really. 'Was that Markus Rehm?!' Do you find there are any transferable skills from sport into work?

Definitely. There are some mindsets you take with you but also technical solutions and for my clients, it's always interesting to hear about it and they're interested to find out what I use. If I show them the valve that I use for my running blade, they get big eyes and say 'I want the same!' They think they can jump as good which is sometimes a little bit funny. But I do enjoy it and I think I'm a curious person. I try to test different things out and it's why my clients can profit the most. I have to try stuff and it's easy for them to believe me. It's nothing for me but personally it could be for you. It helps the clients and I got a nice compliment the day before yesterday. She had a request for a very special solution and she said 'The great thing is, you never say this is not possible. You just say you will do it for the first time.' And I had to smile because it was really funny that she asked me for special solutions and I never told her it's not possible! But I just never did it that way and it was a nice compliment.

I'm assuming long jump training involves a lot of repetition, small changes and another 100 jumps. It's trial and error, isn't it. And you bring that kind of patience and repetition to your job, just trying to make small improvements.

That's for sure. If I tell people how long I have to work on my long jump blades, how detailed it is, they understand I can't do it within one day. You have to build and start somewhere, try it out. When I started doing the long jump and I would have the same prosthetic leg as I have today, I wouldn't jump. I just could not jump at all because it would be too far away. With F1, if you give a beginner a F1 car, he wouldn't be faster than with a normal car, and I'm exactly the same. When I build a prosthetic leg, it's the same. I tell them that this is the start and from here, we have to try things. We try to improve together and this I can transport to my daily job.

I think a lot of people listening, regardless of whether they're involved in sport, they can listen and say 'Yes, I have to improve on these small things rather than trying to change the world everyday.' And the patience you talk about, the resilience to just keep doing things over and over again is a very important lesson for people to hear.

Exactly. It is all about training. I've had clients who have asked for something different so they can walk better or faster, but this is not how it works. You have to walk faster on what you have and if you reach that point, you can go further. But you can't take the third step before you take the second, this is not how it works. But I have a couple of good examples from sport I can tell them.

I said resilience there, but do you use mental or psychological coaches to get you into that mindset of just improving, improving, improving?

At the beginning I was not involved in that. I trained, did my competition. But over the years I got more into the mental prep and it's a big part of my sport and daily routine. Resilience is a big subject. I was reading a lot about the subject and it's quite interesting. Resilience is a word which is used in different ways. It's not coming from psychology, it's a sponge. You can squeeze a sponge but it comes back to its old form and this is what resilience is. You can have bad impacts, bad days, a discussion but you always come back to your strength and for me, I found strategies.

Such as?

For example, controlling impulses. Everybody has impulses and for me it's how to control them or how to deal with your emotions because for many people emotions are great things. For some they are negative things because they influence your behaviours. If you could use your emotions in the right way though. For a competition I use them and have a strategy how to in preparing. I work with music, an anchor technique it's called, and I have a playlist which I only play once a year, which is in the most important competition. There are three songs and if I listen to them somewhere else, I have to leave the room or I have to shut the TV. I don't listen to them anywhere else than on the track when I get to competitions. This playlist I have just great memories and strong emotions, it's why I only use it once a year. I just use it for the main competitions. These are small strategies to use in your life and the more you have, the more you can heal. The same strategy doesn't work for all different occasions. If I'm not motivated for training, it's not the same strategy which will work every day. You have to find different strategies to deal with them.

And the special playlist, is it all music?

In this case it is. There are three songs and if I listen to them somewhere else, I have to leave the room or I have to shut the TV. I don't listen to them anywhere else than on the track when I get to competitions. If you see me on the track warming up for a competition, I warm up and take myself for 5/10 minutes on my own, sit down, towel over my head. Then I say goodbye to my coach and go to the callroom. For big competitions, it's what I always do.

And you're happy to tell us these songs or is it still a secret?

Well it's a secret! Nobody knows these songs! I'm the only person who knows these songs but for the people, they're not that special. But for me, they have a special meaning to me. We all have songs which bring memories but if you use this technique for yourself, it doesn't have to... you hear the song and you're happy straight away. Why not just use it just for a specific reason? It's just what I try to do. I use normal things for my competition.

I was going to say I might guess the songs but we might be here a long time.

I've got just one final question. You've said and demonstrated that nobody should allow other people to set their limits for them. What would you say to someone who is being told that their goal is impossible?

Just start. Don't ask anybody for permission, it's how I started. My parents were scared to put me back on my bike. I caught my dad finding alternatives for doing snowboarding on the computer. I caught him and just said 'what are you doing?' He was looking for alternatives and I said, 'dad I'm going back on the snowboard!' It may not work as it did before but find a solution for it again. I change the adjustment of my prosthetic leg for the snowboard, the wakeboard. Once you've found it out, just do it. Don't overthink it, just start doing it.

Thank you for your time Markus. We hope and expect Tokyo will go ahead next year and we are looking to see how far you can push these distances.