



Arly Velasquez Transcript – A Winning Mindset

So Arly, thank you for joining. Now just to begin, I understand that recently you have been baking bread and selling it to your community. Tell me about that.

Yeah it's actually a project that started last year when we were not sure if we wanted to open a bakery where everyone could come. That was our first idea but we then decided to do it in our kitchen last year, and we were a little worried because we had to deal with people buying online and all this. But with the pandemic, everything went into that. Life pushed us to the right decision the year before, but it's been really nice because it's a sourdough bread with organic flour and it's also vegan - only plant based. It definitely has seen a boom lately about this.

Is this something completely new for you or do you have a heritage in your family of baking?

No, no. This is totally new!

And what's your role? Are you kneading the dough? Or are you the brains behind the operation?

I have had to do everything but for sure, I took a course last year and from there it's natural for an athlete to take it to the deepest level, and always look for better performance. That's exactly what happened with the bread. It started with me doing everything and then I've been hiring people, giving them the ability and skills. Now I am more in the administration and marketing side, this is my business so I have to do everything. But little by little, I can delegate that to other people I have prepared for that position.

And you say about an athlete wanting to make it perfect. Are there other aspects of your sporting career that have been useful in this business career?

Definitely the side of constructing my own brand has helped a lot in order to build another brand. But the skill that has helped me the most is the discipline. You have to wake up super early and that's something I am used to, to take the first lift up the mountain and start training very early.

It's similar and I think just being willing to do it day after day is the key for success in both of them.

There couldn't be a much bigger contrast between baking and what we're going to talk about, which is predominantly danger and managing risk. You moved from mountain biking to sit skiing now. I was lucky to always be connected to a bicycle in my life and when I was ten years old I switched to the mountains and then started doing mountain biking downhill. A couple of years later I was national champion in my category. Well actually, not in my category because I should have been in a kids category but I was in 15-19, I was 12 and already winning nationally. If I would have been in the elite class, I would have been in the top five of the whole Mexico. For such a young guy I was doing very well but at the same time there were a lot of things I didn't take into account. One of the things was equipment at the time. Yep, definitely that was a problem when it came to one race that I broke my bicycle. Instead of being like 'okay, I have to understand the equipment and the bike'. I didn't think of it and just borrowed a bicycle in order to attend the competition. I went through the same jump and it's where I had my accident.

For people who don't know, tell us what happened in 2001 to bring your mountain biking career to an end.

So I was getting prepared for a race that was going to happen on a Sunday. On the Saturday I broke my bike and one friend told me I could use his. It was built with very good accessories but the frame was not so good and very, very heavy. I was just 13 years old and 50 kilos, and this guy was 80kg. I didn't take things into account and the next weekend, I was training and went through the same jump that I broke my bike on the weekend before, and the bicycle shot me to the ground, I landed on my head with the bicycle on top of me. So it was an extra weight. And I cracked my back with the pressure of the jump, the bike and me falling with the gravity on the ground. I stayed in the mountain feeling my legs for 45 minutes and then the paramedics came and checked me out. They didn't find anything wrong or broken and told me to sit down, they helped me up and pulled me from the arms. And that's where I wasn't feeling good at all. So I laid down again and when I went back to my back, that's where I felt the crack on it and right away I stopped feeling my legs. That was the moment I entered this world of disability.

During that lengthy recovery over a number of years going through rehab, were you immediately missing the adrenaline and the risk of that sport that you had loved?

I guess it was a different kind of rush I was feeling in order to gain back. It was not a normal transition, it was a lot of work but in a different way. But definitely I was missing the feeling of freedom. That's something I find very often in the sports. Even if I'm just riding my bicycle on a Sunday with my dog or my friends, I feel that freedom and it was something I wasn't feeling yet. The very first sport that I went to was basketball and wheelchair basketball. Just to be able to be in a wheelchair that was a little bit faster than the one that I used regularly, the turns were super sharp and I was fighting with other athletes in order to get the ball. That adrenaline put me in a different mindset that I was missing for sure. Sports were therapeutic. Part of my recovery and my psychological recovery in order to feel useful and with freedom. But to be honest, it was like, coming from mountain biking downhill with drops and jumps and surrounded by the natural world. Once being trapped in this small basketball court, I felt a little trapped and this was not what I was used to.

Tell us the story of how you found sit skiing or mono skiing. New Year's Day 2009. This is a brilliant tale.

In 2008 I worked doing musical events and because of this I earned some money I put into a holiday for myself to Canada. Finally being in the snow and the cold. Then it was the very last days I was about to go back to Mexico and it crossed my mind that, I think at some point of my life I saw something of mono skiing, that it's kind of skiing to downhill mountain biking. So if I'm here, maybe I can find a place to do it? I started calling the ski resorts around and I found a place I could try it. For sure the first time that you do it, it's not that you really do it, they are just taking you down the mountain in a ski. Looking back, I wasn't even controlling, but it gave me the feeling I could get out in sport and be surrounded by the natural environment around me. Just trees, views from the mountains that I had been missing so much. It just gave me the reasons to go back to Mexico, sell all my stuff, get the money I had earned from the musical events from last year, sell my car and pretty much flew to the border. I bought a very old SUV, put all my stuff in. It was very expensive to have a GPS so I just had my sheets of directions in order to ride 14 hours from the border until Park City. That's how my career started. They asked me if I knew already how to sit ski and I was like 'yeah, I did it. But I did it once!'

It's interesting because I'm thinking about the whole world this year has probably felt trapped inside a house or inside a flat or an apartment. Everybody listening will understand that sense of freedom you talked about to being in a hospital or a wheelchair to suddenly being out on a mountain again. I've seen a quote from you where you said that you were almost crying as you came down on the ski lift for that first time because you'd found a place where you wanted to spend your life. Can you sum up what you were feeling here?

It's very rare that there are moments in your life where you are feeling and your gut tells you that you are in the right place. That you are doing the right thing and that it's something that you want to keep doing in your life. That's what I felt for the first time. I was in that place in a sport that I right away saw the potential. I knew as long as I was able to master that sport, I was going to feel back the freedom I used to feel when I was in the bicycle. I wanted to invest all my energy and attention and resources, my life and time and skills, in order to master that sport and take it to the highest level that I could.

You went from mountain biking to sit skiing and I completely understand why you didn't choose an easier sport or a safer sport. Was there any consideration in your mind for the risk that you were taking in moving to another sport where injuries are quite commonplace?

Well yeah. Not for me but my mother! It was a situation where I was going to fly to the border for the SUV. 'Arly, I cannot let you go. My intuition is telling me that I don't want to leave or leave something we already lived.' It was already very hard for the whole family that I had an accident. They didn't want me to go through that again. But for me it was something that made sense and I was not willing to let that go, you know? Just because of fear, I was not ready to leave my dream just because of something I'd lived in the past. It was definitely a situation that could happen again but there was a very strong force pulling me, giving me certainty that it was the path I wanted to go. So I also felt at that time that I had to become an adult, take my own decisions and decide on my own. Because I was going to be alone in a country where I didn't know anyone, I was going to be by myself and I wanted to be conscious about every single move. It's not the same when you break something and you have your whole family to support you and back you up. When you are in a country where you don't know anyone, if something happens, it's pretty much on you!

a few months later, I went back and showed them videos and pictures. I just gave them certainty that I was putting a lot of attention and

equipment in the whole environment. I was not doing any stupid moves just to be reckless, I was being very conscious so they were confident I was giving my best and taking care of myself, and they started supporting me. With such a sport it's so expensive that I needed to cover all expenses as well. The money a year before went away within months and I had to convince people and start working on my sponsor skills, preparing presentations of what I have done. It was tough I have to say. It's still tough.

Do you think there's a possibility you became more carefree and less concerned about the danger of this sport because you were already paralysed?

With the disability I already had, I face a lot of limitations. So the last thing I want is to be even more limited than I am already. I know limitations are always in your head but in one way or another, you do need your physical abilities in order to travel with six bags and your monoski and a wheelchair through airports for example. If I break a shoulder, I know I'm going to be facing an even harder situation for myself. I didn't feel that I am a daredevil. It's a very thin line, but I always try to be within the limit and I have had so many crashes. But one of the things I work on is to be as strong as I possibly can in order to hold the crashes as a normal thing we face in this sport. But at the same time, I try to avoid the jumps, for example. If it's a jump or steepness, I think I have been calculating the risk all the time in order to be safe. I have always been looking into the progress and baby steps, a little bigger and bigger.

How do you calculate the risk though?

Of course we are in a sport with a lot of variables all the time. It's very hard to be calculating, but the only thing you can do is lots of training, of situations and trying different things. In Sochi I had a very, very hard crash.

I think the commentary from that crash says it all

[play audio]

What happened there?

that was a mistake that I should have thought a little deeper. But for me, it's always a thing I have to do my own skis, prepare my own monoski, the tuning of the skis is the last thing in the night. By the time I'm in the

Paralympics and I'm in a position where I can delegate the ski tuning, it was something that I wanted to do. So I talked with the technician and we talked about what I needed, he said 'Arly, I've got it' and I loved to hear that because I could sleep a little more hours. But the reality is you cannot delegate that so fast. You have to have a progress in order to understand how he understands how you really need the ski and communicating that properly, which is another skill that I have brought to the bakery!

What was the recovery like after that crash?

I went through a very hard surgery after the crash in Sochi, I didn't notice at the time but then later on in summer I had to go through surgery because of that crash. Once I went back from that, I realised there was a lot of people being touched by just my journey and the things I decided to achieve and had been achieving little by little. There were people who support me, back me up with this journey and one of them was Romarico and Rico, two friends that I met at some point because they are film director. And they were like, 'We are going to go and film your story' and it was just, oh my god. You know how many times I have heard that? Just by the fact that I said that, they were like 'Oh no, no, no. Now we go!' So yeah, they came like me when I started, not knowing anything about the snow or winter, how to get dressed, how to walk on the snow, how to ski. Until that point, I was feeling kind of lonely. I had invested a lot of resources and spent a lot of life on this, but sometimes I felt like nobody cared about it. There were people who, when I was leaving, saying 'Oh you go back again to go for holiday?' No, this is not close to a holiday, this is non-stop work! I feel lonely a lot of times but how did I find the motivation? The sport is so fulfilling just by the fact of doing it, that in a way it heals. It's therapeutic to be up there in the mountains, at the top of it, to see that view, to see a sunrise in the early morning. And to be challenging you, your fears, your physical capacities..

Arly, are you addicted to danger? To thrill-seeking?

I guess in a way I am. But I don't see it as a risk, I see that when I am in the mountain on a sit ski, I just feel the most free. you are in the mountain and well connected to your equipment. You go down the mountain on a perfect day in the snow. To beat that freedom? You can't, I cannot find another place I can find that. That takes me back again and again to the mountains. in a monoski you are able to control massive amounts of

energy. you are not using a motor, you're using the gravity and your tool that is creating massive speed but in a controlled way. I think that feeling is very hard to get. Maybe that was something I was feeling in downhill mountain bike, but I feel it in another place and it could be addictive.

Is there anything that genuinely does scare you in sport or away from it that you calculate the risk as being too much?

Ahh...

Is it something quite ordinary or mundane that scares you?

No not mundane. We face fear very often, at least me. I remember in Austria and it was such an intimidating or threatening mountain because it was so steep and the condition of the snow was so icy. That scares but you are there and you have to do it, you have to perform. You have to just make it happen. You have to get action regardless of if you are super scared. So yeah. If I bring it down, what scares me? I don't know. Once you are up there and you get the perspective of that kind of fear and no matter what you have to get action, once you bring it to the world, the more mundane world, maybe things that might scare you like investments or dreams, you take perspective and it's like, even if it doesn't work the way you plan it, it cannot be so bad. We have learned, with the accident and disability and sport, we can get really bad crashes Even if bad things happen, there's always a way to reverse that and achieve whatever you dream.

Do you have a risky attitude to other aspects of your life or are you a cautious, safe person when you're not on a mountain?

No, I have that attitude for everything! It's just a matter of intuition. I have developed thankfully because of taking decisions I have no idea, like the day I sold all my stuff for sit skiing, I had no idea of how it was going to end up. It was a matter of 'does it feel right or not?' And since it was the thing that felt right at the moment and it gave me a lot of experiences that I feel very happy and grateful and proud of them, now it also comes through in other parts of my life that I feel it's the way I have to go and I just take the decision.

You have a sister and a young nephew, Hironimo. If Hironimo came to you and said he was going to be a skier, or doing a dangerous sport, would you pass on your attitude to him or would you be like your own mother was and be a bit worried or a bit anxious about it?

I think I would be like my mentor. One of the most important people in my career is Eric. He's also a skier. I would be more like him because we found a lot of preparation. We built together our own carbon fibre. He taught me all he knew about how to turn a ski. He gave all his knowledge and the story of the sport and how to adapt the monoski. Once you are so connected to your equipment, you lower a lot of risk in the equation. If Hiro asks me, I would like to be that Eric for him. I would like to be that person that gives him a lot of time, analyses the sport, analyses the way to get better performance and to put that into the equation in order to lower the risk and improve the performance. The last thing I want to see is Hiro having a bad journey in anything he decided.

If there are people listening who may be feeling fearful about making a big step in their life, what advice would you give them?

To feel fear is normal. Very normal. We feel fear to whatever we don't know, the unknown. So, I will always, and that's something I felt. Does it feel like fear or like emotion? Sometimes you can also get confused by the two emotions. And I have to say that there is nothing greater than to be motivated in order to achieve big things, than having emotion. To be excited. When I say emotion, I mean excited about something. There's a lot of times you have to act even if you feel fear about it, because there's a lot of things that you can find which you will be so grateful about and that will give you so much knowledge about something, once you just decide to step on and go regardless of fear. Even if that big thing you want to achieve doesn't happen, just by the fact you had fear about something, the person you are now, just by the fact that you acted, is a better person than you were before. Either way, you will win.

I don't think I would get to where I am if I was not with a lot of values which construct who I am, and to be respectful, to be grateful, to be disciplined as well as having love for my own life. In another way, my family, my sister is gay and she's married with her wife. They went through a whole different journey so for me, I have always been super proud of the family that I have. I have always been super proud as well that even

though I have a disability, I have never felt pity for myself and been like, 'don't do that, you have a disability'. Sometimes I don't feel like talking about just values, your actions have to talk just for you. My story kind of does that and what I like the most is, I respect so many things but I like that people see my story and are inspired to achieve their own dreams. That's what I like the most about putting my story out there. It will reflect so differently in the people who are watching it.

It's been an absolute pleasure speaking to you and if I'm ever in Mexico City, I will definitely come by and visit your bakery. I've got a bit of a sweet tooth so I would order something like a pastry.

Absolutely! We have the pastry side, which is all the time from the seasons, we have different breads. So, I'm pretty sure you will like that as well! Please let me know when you are in Mexico and I will be really happy to show you around. I really like to show people my country and to do it in a bicycle, there isn't a better way!