



Bebe Vio - A Winning Mindset - 8th January 2021

Andy Stevenson: Bebe there is so much I want to talk to you about. The Rising Phoenix film, your Art4Sport charity foundation and of course, your own Paralympic success. But to understand all that, we need to start with the context of why you are who you are. At the age of eleven you were struck with a severe case of meningitis, which saw both of your legs amputated from the knee down, and both arms amputated from the forearm, and left you with facial scarring. As an eleven year-old, what are your memories of what must have been a horrible time for you?

Bebe Vio: I was so young but I remember everything, but it's featured from the view of an eleven year old girl. I remember all the good things, of course all the pain as well, but all of my pain was filtered by the good part of it. I remember my family came every Saturday night, that was the best day ever for pizza and films all together. We are so Italian so pizza once a week is a must! I remember all of the amazing doctors who were helping me in that moment, all of the amazing letters which I received from all my friends, my coaches, my scout group, my schoolmates. It was a good period from what I remember. And every time I say these things, there are my parents behind me and they used to say, 'maybe you were too young but that period was not that cool!'

AS: It's remarkable, particularly as a child because even as an adult, it's remarkable to be able to focus on the positive side or even find a positive side through that. Because it's no exaggeration to say you could have died.

BV: The average is 97% of people die in the first 48 hours. So I was quite lucky. I'm alive because I fought for my family, for my siblings. And if you are in a bad situation and almost dying, you have to think that if you are going to die, maybe it is better for you. Because the suffering and the pain, it comes after the disease, after the hospital. All my skin was scarred, my body was not there. Just my mind was there in some ways. But when I was there I just thought, 'if I'm going to die, maybe this is better for me because this is too painful'. But if I'm going to die, my family, friends, a part of them will die. I don't want to see the people suffering around me. Maybe if I'm going to be the only one who suffers, the people around me may be happier. Because I'm not going to show them that this is painful. Instead of finding your happiness and looking for it, I think the best way to find it is by finding others happiness before it. Because if I see my sister happy, my coach happy, I'm going to be happy too because of them. So if you find others happiness, you'll be happy too.

AS: How long did it take you and your family, to accept what had happened to you and accept that your life was very different to how you probably planned it out before you got the meningitis?

BV: At the beginning it looked so hard, either because in Italy at that age in 2008, disability in general was not really present. Of course there were people with disabilities everywhere, but they were not famous, people with disabilities were poor people, pitied. At the beginning of course, it was so hard but then we got lucky thanks to my parents. My

mum went to the Venice Marathon, very famous in Italy, and there were Alex Zanardi and Oscar Pistorious. So those two were the first two people with disability that I met. Thanks to them I understood how cool my life could be, how important it was to live a normal life with a disability, how important sport is in general, how it was important to live life through sport.

AS: You were very lucky to meet Alex Zanardi in particular because he is an absolute hero in Italy and we are all thinking of him at the moment, he's going through another very, very difficult time in his life as he recovers from a serious cycling accident. To meet Alex at that moment, you couldn't have picked a better person to meet to inspire you?

BV: I was ignorant about this new world of the Paralympic sport in general, I had never seen someone with a prosthetic or on a wheelchair before. When I was younger, wheelchair was just for old people. I didn't know a prosthetic, or that there were people without legs or arms. It was unbelievable to me to understand my new life through disability. And I couldn't believe I would be part of the fencing environment again. At the beginning I was like 'no, this is for people with disabilities, I don't have a disability.' And then my father, well both my parents, they told me 'Okay, you are disabled! It doesn't mean if we give you back legs you're not a person with a disability, you are still a person with a disability.' At the beginning I didn't want to do wheelchair fencing and then, the first time I tried it, I fell in love with it again and everything was almost the same as before. Everything was amazing. I lived my best moments of my life two times.

AS: Quite a few of the athletes I've spoken to on this series were doing sport before an accident or illness, then they were able to find that same sport again or perhaps a slightly different version of that sport again. It feels to me as you talk there that finding wheelchair fencing must have been such a motivation for you, and kept you going, and in some ways possibly saved you. Would that be true?

BV: You know, maybe the best thing was I was part again of my team. I had my same team as before. When I went into wheelchair fencing, I went back to my old gym and they didn't have the tools you need for wheelchair fencing, the piste. They didn't have the wheelchairs and they didn't know how to teach it in wheelchairs. Everything was new for everyone but my old coaches, they learned how to teach fencing in a wheelchair. All the teammates learnt it in a wheelchair, it was new for everyone. We were a good team before but after that it was something so great. Not only the fencing, but all the changing room environment. There you have to be naked in front of the others. They used to see me with everything, the disability, the problems with the skin. So it was so weird to me at the beginning to be naked in front of them. But that was something so big, that we both learnt, and it was great because at the beginning, my prosthetics were like a game for everyone, a play. We used to play with the prosthetics, the legs, the wheelchair, everything. So what was really cool was being part of the group again and the fact they were watching me in the same way as before. Nothing changes.

AS: It's a very defiant thing that comes across from you about you in the changing rooms and showing people, right, 'this is my body now and you accept it or you don't.' Did you ever have people who, I mean maybe now, who stare, laugh at you, make jokes. How do you deal with that?

BV: You know, maybe the problem is I'm the first one who jokes about me? And we are so Italian, so we used to joke about everything! Everything is a kind of joke and something

which you can play on. It's much easier to play about someone else if you are the first to play about yourself. My father and mother used to laugh about everything, even very, very bad things! Death, life, everything. They taught me how to play about me, joke about me.

AS: I completely understand what you're saying about that, and I find, and people get very bored of me making jokes about arms and legs, but if you own the joke yourself, it diffuses an awkward topic, doesn't it.

BV: Yeah exactly. What I'm looking for is people who can see my disability as an opportunity in general. So many times I learn how to live by myself. When I was so young, I was part of the national team so I would travel a lot, I was 14 years old, so just three years after my disability. I really had to learn how to live by myself, how to do everything by myself. And then three years ago I moved to my own house, so I didn't know how to cook or do anything. These things were so important to me, to do everything by myself. And it's so crazy because when I moved to live with some roommates, the crazy thing was that I was the only one with a disability but I was teaching them!

Is it possible to say either back then or maybe now, what was it that upset you most? Was it the limb loss or the facial scarring for example?

BV: I really don't know how to answer this question...but, I learned how to live my life again, and I learned how to enjoy my life so much. So I think if you do something you really, really love, you are not scared by anything. My coaches told me how to switch everything which could scare me into something good. So you know, I see my disability but every time I find something I cannot do, that's the moment, they used to tell me it was impossible. 'You cannot do that because you have a disability, you cannot do that because of your prosthetics.' Every time I find this situation is the moment I really enjoy it, because I must do that. I'm gonna do that. Maybe I need much more time and tries, but it's the moment I wake up so much and I say 'okay, I must do that.'

AS: Let's talk about the Paralympics. I know your first connection to the Paralympics was that you were a torchbearer weren't you for London 2012 representing athletes of the future. How much did that experience inspire you?

BV: So much. It was my first Paralympic Games, I had never seen one before. I of course knew about the Olympics, but I didn't know about the Paralympics, and I feel so stupid saying this thing. But this is the reality. When I came there, I was a torchbearer representing the future Paralympics, and it was so scary for me because I'd just begun wheelchair fencing, and being there and representing the future Paralympic athletes, was so scary because I was there with this amazing torch, thinking that 'now I'm representing them, but I don't know if I could be a Paralympic athlete'. I was so scared but also, so much emotion with me. It was amazing. I cried from Piccadilly Circus to Trafalgar Square, it was really amazing. during the Paralympics, I was already there. In London there is Sky Television, and I was working for them - I had my own channel, about how was the Paralympic Games seen through the eye of a young athlete. I really lived all the emotions of everyone, and every day I was in the fencing field, dreaming about the moment and me being there and being part of it. I saw the medal ceremony, I was crying and saying 'One day I'm going to be there, I want to be there! I have to be there!' Being in Rio de Janeiro four years after was... woah, I don't know how to describe it.

AS: It's incredible to be watching 2012 and thinking this is where you want to be, and four years later actually being there. You won Paralympic gold in Rio and your celebration is one of the most intense celebrations I have seen in any sport, ever. Talk us through what was going on in your mind in those moments.

BV: If you dream about an Olympic Games since five... Then at eleven I had the meningitis, so they told me my dream was not possible. But after a few years I realised my dream was really possible. The Paralympic Games has something more, because you've fought a lot to be there. In the beginning they told me I had to change the sport, go and run. Go and swim. 'No I want to do fencing, please! I want to be there.' So we fought a lot for that. After the final semester of the high school, my parents told me that if I don't have a higher grade at the high school, I would never go to the Paralympics. So I studied so hard to have a high grade, and after the final exam I was so, I trained so hard and was finally there, but the day before leaving Rome to be in Rio, at my last training I had a bad, bad injury to my arm. So what was so hard, my competition was the last two days of the Games, I spent two weeks there crying all the time, not thinking my dream was possible. And then you fight, you fight so much. And then the day before you have an injury. 'Again! I cannot do that again!' So I spent two weeks trying to train as best as I can, and then I was not sure to the Games until two days before, 14th September 2016. It's why I cried and screamed so much, because I really, really, *really* wanted that medal.

AS: All of the emotion came spilling out of you, and I urge people listening who maybe haven't seen it, it's there on YouTube. Just watch that celebration. It made me think about great Italian sporting celebrations, because you're a very passionate nation. You're probably a little bit too young for this, but I'm sure your parents remember Marco Tardelli in 1982, Toto Schillaci at 1990. Ferrari fans at the F1, you're a very passionate nation, and that celebration of yours at Rio was right up there with any of those.

BV: You know, Marco Tardelli came to me the year after that scream and he said, 'You know, my scream was the most famous in Italy, and now it's yours. I'm not talking about it!'

AS: All of this brings us nicely on to Rising Phoenix, because that Rio celebration is one of the most dramatic moments of the film. And you're one of the key stars, and in actual fact you *are* the Rising Phoenix that the film is named after.

BV: At the age of 12 I was part of a scout group and they gave me this nickname. My name was the Rising Phoenix. Because can burn and die and live again. My scout group saw me living, burning, dying and living again.

How did you first learn about the film and come to be involved?

BV: Both the directors of the film came to me, and they told my parents that they want me to be part of the film. For us it was kind of crazy because I'd never been part of a real film or documentary. So we really thought this film could do a big change in people's minds because everything looks like how someone presents it to you. So we just need to show to the people how much is great and how it's amazing to have the Paralympic

sport and life. Paralympic athletes and Olympic athletes, the difference is just the story. Both of them have a great opportunity and great physical strengths, Paralympic athletes have all of them, amazing backgrounds and stories, impossible things that they made possible. The best thing of the film is that there is no one story. The best thing of the video is that the film doesn't show heroes. I personally don't believe in heroes. I just believe in people. Everyone can do everything if they believe in their team, if they believe in themselves, if they believe in the population. The cool thing of the film is it shows people who had so much bad luck, but through that they found out how to be a better person, how to live a better life, how to fight in some way and some situation. How much a family can be part of the change. This film shows so many different people who achieved so much, and that's why I really loved the film.

AS: Your depiction in the documentary is stunning. You're filmed in a stately home of some kind, and it's beautifully lit, you're wearing body armour but all of your limbs and scars are on show. And it's a picture of defiance. Where was that filmed and how long did it take?

BV: The interview was so long, maybe because I speak quite a lot! But we talked a lot, so much time. Maybe I'm lucky because I'm Italian, so we were in an amazing villa close to Rome, and that place was so cool and it was really amazing. We went there and shot everything in that villa, and then the interview in another house. It was cool! If the director is cool, and they were both so funny, so we enjoyed it so much because we really enjoyed shooting the video and shooting the film. And the dress I had was made by Christian Dior, because the fashion director of Christian Dior - she's a woman - she is the first Italian and woman fashion director in such a big house as Dior. I really appreciated this because she became a friend of mine and made this dress, and we used it for that moment. We thought about this dress, thinking about me and my art, I don't know, and fencing. And it was cool. The villa was amazing, the dress was amazing. I just put my face there.

AS: One other thing, your family has set up a charitable foundation called Art4Sport. I believe the aim is to provide children with disabilities with opportunities to take part in sport. Tell us about that.

BV: When I began doing fencing, disability sport was not known, there were just old people being part of the sport. And we didn't know the reason why just older people are doing Paralympic sport. And then we understood that we didn't know of the sports and the Paralympic environment. We didn't know how much a prosthetic or wheelchair cost, and how much being part of the Paralympic sport was expensive in some way. We understood the parliament doesn't pay for Paralympic sports tools and equipment for people with a disability. So of course, if you are six years old and you want to run, an average family doesn't have the money to buy a prosthetic. It's not necessary to dream about the Paralympic Games, but the things you want to do is just take out all the young guys from the house and their rooms, and just put them on the field, put them in a gym, be part of the sport environment. Now we are 38 guys from three years old to 34 I think. The cool thing is we help them to be part of their life through sport, and that's the best thing ever. I love how the face of a six year old guy changes before and after playing

sport, how their lives change, how the family changes. We are all young guys and we are all depending on our family emotionally, but if the children is happy, the mother is happy. If the child is sad, the parents are sad. We want to make the children so happy through the sport and thanks to the happiness of the children, all the families are going to feel better and part of a team. We are trying to change people's lives, and my parents are doing an amazing job at changing the perception of the Paralympic sport. I just love them so much because of how much they are working and the effort they are putting into this kind of job.

It must make you and your parents feel very proud to hear from the actual children you're helping?

BV: Yeah I love them so much. I recognise both of them from the voices and they are amazing. Ephrem really grows with us because we met him so many years ago, and we saw him growing up, just like Ricardo. It's amazing how their lives change through sport and we are so proud of them.

AS: Now I'm sure we could speak for hours, I'm sure you could speak for hours! I mean that in a very nice, positive way, but we could speak for a long time. I'll just ask you a couple of questions to finish. You're still only 23 years old. How much more do you think you can achieve in your career?

BV: I don't know! I'm so scared about this next Paralympic Games so I really don't know if I'm going to pass that. So my dream is to be in Los Angeles 2028, because we thought 2028, that is going to be the second step after London 2012. Thinking about that dream I had in 2012 to inspire a generation, it's what made me start doing sport in a real situation, like as my job.

AS: You mention LA, and you actually went to the White House a couple of years ago and met Barack Obama. Not everyone can say that! You had dinner with Barack Obama.

BV: The house was so big. Barack and Michelle, they are so funny. And they are super chilled! They were super easy and it was so cool. The food was not that good, but because I'm Italian.

AS: Not pasta or pizza, no?

BV: They did so many different things, it was a mixture between Italian and American food. My grandmother is a much better cook, so I can bring her next time I'm there.

AS: Now people listening will be able to tell how positive, optimistic and happy you are. But you must have days where you feel down, like everyone else. So you must feel that life is a bit unfair. Do you, and if you do, how do you get through those days?

BV: You know, everyone used to say they had their hero or they take their inspiration from someone else. But the voices you listened to before (Art4Sport), they are my biggest inspiration. All the other guys of our team, they are my greatest inspiration ever. If you have a great team like that, and if you have to show them that you are always happy, that is the reason why I'm working so hard for the Paralympic Movement, it's why I wake up happy everyday because I know that I'm going to meet them everyday. I train everyday with some of them, so I always have to look happy and to show my happiness in order to try to convince them to do more, to be more and to train more.

AS: Bebe, so much of your approach seems to be about helping others and making others feel good about themselves. It's been an honour speaking to you. I've been wanting to speak to you for a long, long time and watching Rising Phoenix increased that desire to speak to you, so it's been a real pleasure and thank you for your time. I'm sure people listening will have learned so much from you.

BV: Thank you so much!

AS: Thanks to Bebe Vio. Her passion and defiance come bounding across the airwaves. The 20th and final episode of this series of A Winning Mindset: Lessons From The Paralympics podcast, brought to you by the International Paralympic Committee and their longstanding partner, Allianz. I hope you've enjoyed all 20 interviews, so please leave a review and let us know which one was your favourite. I've shared laughter with Jonnie Peacock, Ellen Keane, RJ Mitte and Bebe Vio. I've learnt about things I had little experience of with Meica Horsburgh, Todd Hodgetts, Husnah Kukundakwe and Kaleo Maclay. I've sat spellbound as Grace Wembolua, Arly Velasquez and Bruno Bosnjak told me their stories. I've listened with admiration of Paralympic legends Tatyana McFadden, Greg Polychronidis, Sherif Osman, Manuela Schar and Markus Rehm. And I've talked to young Paralympians like Daniel Chan, Peter Pal Kiss and Carlos Serrano, who still have so much to give. And I've picked up leadership skills from IPC President, Andrew Parsons. Thanks to all of them but thanks to you for listening, subscribing and reviewing. Goodbye for now.