

Episode 47 | Marni Abbott-Peter Pt. 1

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Sarah Smith 0:41

Hello and welcome back to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. I'm Sarah Smith, your host of the podcast and a student intern at the Vancouver Adapted Music Society Today's guest is Marni Abbott-Peter. Marni has had a very successful career in wheelchair basketball as an athlete. She won several medals at the Paralympic Games and has been inducted into Halls of Fame across Canada and BC. She now coaches and works for the BC Wheelchair Basketball Society. We'll get into all of this, but before we start our conversation, it's important that I take a moment to acknowledge the land on which we are fortunate to host this podcast. This is the unceded and ancestral territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, and has been stewarded by them since time immemorial. Vancouver is located on territory that was never ceded or given up to the crown by these peoples. The term unceded acknowledges the dispossession of the land and the inherent rights that Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh hold to the territory. The term serves as a reminder that these peoples have never left their territories and will always retain their jurisdiction and relationships with the land. Marni, welcome to Discover Stories.

Marni Abbott-Peter 2:01

Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Sarah Smith 2:02

Yeah, we're very happy to have you here. Just to start off, could you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about you?

Marni Abbott-Peter 2:11

Sure? My name is Marni Abbott-Peter. I've I'm a 57 year old woman with an SCI (spinal cord injury). I was acquired an injury in a downhill skiing accident when I was 18 years old. So I have a permanent spinal cord injury, and I've used a wheelchair ever since that day. Luckily, I got involved with wheelchair sports early on, and that really helped me in terms of learning how to live with a disability and understanding what my options were. And I think it really helped in the whole rehab process for me. So I'm currently working full time for BC Wheelchair Basketball Society and also for Wheelchair Basketball Canada. So quite busy at the moment.

Sarah Smith 2:54

Cool, yeah. Well, thank you for making the time to join us. So I understand that sort of after your injury, you might have explored a couple of other sports, but obviously you've landed quite extensively on wheelchair basketball. Can you talk a little bit about that trajectory and how you ended up choosing wheelchair basketball to pursue as like your sport?

Marni Abbott-Peter 3:16

Sure. Yeah, I was actually quite lucky when I was in rehab a few months after my injury, I met Rick Hansen, and it was in the 80s, and at that time, he was planning his Man in Motion World Tour, and he had already participated in quite a few different Paralympics and games for people with disabilities, in terms of competing in athletics and basketball. So he told me about wheelchair sports and about options that were available to me. He encouraged me to get involved. At that point, I was still fairly new to it all, and the easiest thing for me to try early on was swimming. I didn't require any specialized equipment. Thought I could just hop in the swimming pool and start swimming around without kicking, but it was a little bit different than that on my initial experience. But then I did get quite comfortable with it. I ended up having a coach and swam out at UBC for a few years and competed in my first international competition in 1986 in swimming. And then that's where I first saw wheelchair basketball being played at the international level, and I really connected with the women that were involved with the team then, and the coach was really excited and encouraged me to get involved. And so it was shortly after that that I started to play more and to get more involved. And then in the late 80s, we created a women's program here in BC. Me and my sisters and a couple of my friends started a team called the BC Breakers, which still exists today. And that was kind of the start of it all. And then in '92 I was finally able to make the women's national team, and that was my first big international competition as a wheelchair basketball player.

Sarah Smith 4:58

Wow, very cool. Very lucky to have met Rick Hansen as well in that capacity. That's really cool.

Marni Abbott-Peter 5:03

I thought he was completely crazy. He was telling me about this goal he had wheeling around the world, and I couldn't even wheel to the end of the hallway to the cafeteria, for Pete's sake. So I thought it was, it was quite inspiring to me when he actually completed the tour and did what he said he was going to do—raising awareness and millions of dollars and just creating opportunities for people with disabilities around the world.

Sarah Smith 5:26

Yeah, yeah, really amazing and inspiring to see, sort of like what you can do. Yeah, absolutely. And I get the impression that you're quite competitive, just based on what you said so far.

Marni Abbott-Peter 5:37

I definitely, when I take something on, I like to do a good job of it. So if that means that I am competitive, probably, yeah, I don't know if I still have that same eye of the tiger I had when I was 20 years old, but for sure, yeah, that's definitely part of the DNA.

Sarah Smith 5:57

Yeah, very cool. And so what made you sort of passionate to continue in wheelchair basketball like you've you competed for quite a long time at a really high level. What was it that sort of sparked that drive?

Marni Abbott-Peter 6:11

So my coach, I had the same coach during my entire career on the women's national team, Tim Frick, and he actually encouraged me early on to start into my coach education, and I got involved with coaching some of the juniors and the Canada games level athletes, which is sort of teens and young adults. And I felt that I really enjoyed it, and I wanted to carry on with it. And it seemed like a really great transition when I retired from basketball to stay involved and to give back to the sport that has given me so much. So, yeah, it was, I think it was just kind of my destiny and my calling in terms of the way my life has worked out.

Sarah Smith 6:52

That's really cool. Yeah, it seems like a good fit that you've given, that you've stayed in it for so long, both as an athlete, and then transitioning sort of that full circle to the coaching side of things.

Marni Abbott-Peter 7:02

Yeah, definitely, yeah.

Sarah Smith 7:05

And you've had a lot of success with Team Canada. Paralympic golds in '92, '96, 2000, bronze in 2004 and four World Championships. I believe that's a very impressive like, stack of accomplishments.

Marni Abbott-Peter 7:19

Yeah, we had a pretty great team. We were essentially undefeated in international competition for almost 14 years, so it was pretty devastating in 2004 when we actually lost the semi final and ended up playing for bronze instead of gold, but we were able to rally back and win that bronze. But yeah, I was very lucky throughout my career, and it all comes down to the great leadership we had in our program. We had great support from our national organization, through our provincial organization, here at BC Wheelchair Basketball Society, and then through Tim as a coach. He was a real innovator and sort of ahead of his time in terms of the mental side of the game and really implementing mental performance into everything that we did, and I think that really helped us be successful.

Sarah Smith 8:05

That's really cool. And I don't know that that's something that you hear about a lot in, like, elite level sport, is that, the mental side of things, but it's so important, as you're saying.

Marni Abbott-Peter 8:16

Definitely crucial at that level. Everybody has the same skill, and they all know the strategies and tactics. The edge is your confidence and your mental preparation in order to perform when the pressure's on. So certainly, he trained us well in that area, and it's great now in my coaching career that I can use some of those tools and skills that he gave me and bring them to the athletes that I'm coaching now, so.

Sarah Smith 8:41

Yeah, that's really interesting. Like that other side that people don't always think about. Right off the bat, when you think of sport, people tend to think of physical ability and like strength and all of those things, rather than like the mental side of it.

Marni Abbott-Peter 8:53

Especially in women's sport, I think a lot of girls and women who participate in sport sometimes don't have the highest level of confidence, and there's other anxiety and stuff

around participating, and so having that mental sort of fortitude and ability to have a positive attitude about learning and training and competing is really important.

Sarah Smith 9:16

Yeah, totally. I love that. I love that they brought that in, and that you're continuing to do that with your coaching as well. So obviously, lots of work goes into winning these championships. I mean that, I think that's probably the understatement of the century, but given all of those layers and that work that goes into it, what was it like to actually win that first gold?

Marni Abbott-Peter 9:35

For me, it was super exciting. Barcelona was a real turning point for me, even though it was almost 10 years after my injury, I think I was, I was a skier and a racer, and then that was my dream, was to be skiing at the Olympics and to compete at that level. And then, when that was taken away from me, it was difficult at first, but when I was in Barcelona, and we had gone through the entire tournament, according, you know, each day, we had a plan, and at the end of the day we would revisit it, and we had accomplished our goal for that day, and by the end of the tournament, there we were on the podium with our gold medal around our neck. And for me, sitting there with my teammates and my Team Canada jersey and our gold medals, and hearing the national anthem and seeing the flag being raised was a real I was just really proud of myself and my team. I wasn't thinking, "Oh, I wish I'd been skiing," that day. So it was a real turning point for me, just in terms of realizing my own potential and what my future could look like. And yeah, that, you know, it was you could still didn't matter if you had a disability or not. You know, you still compete for your country, still set goals, you know, work together with a group towards a common goal. All of those things were really, really great lessons for me early on, and it's really helped me throughout my life, for sure.

Sarah Smith 10:52

Wow, yeah, that's a pretty phenomenal moment to describe.

Marni Abbott-Peter 10:56

Yeah, it's hard to put in words. And even now, you know, I get teared up every time I hear the national anthem. It's a bit ridiculous, really, but it does have an impact on me. And you know how music sometimes triggers memories, for sure. That's one song that definitely sets off a lot of good memories for me.

Sarah Smith 11:15

Oh, absolutely, yeah. And well deserved, for sure. That's pretty phenomenal. So obviously, you're very well decorated in terms of Paralympic Games and World Championships, and you've been inducted to a number of Halls of Fame across the country and around BC and Vancouver. I'm wondering sort of with that legacy and that you're continuing, obviously in coaching, to work towards what sort of impact do you hope to have on the disability sports community through that legacy of success.

Marni Abbott-Peter 11:51

I think for me, being a mentor and a role model for some of the younger kids and families with kids with disabilities. Like, it's hard to navigate, there's a lot for a family to navigate when they have a child with a disability, so encouraging them, you know, to be involved in sport, to advocate for their child, to be physically active at school, and to create opportunities for those, the younger generation, to get involved and to take advantage of some of the opportunities. For me, I went all through school and high school as an able bodied person, so I participated in all sports and intramurals and all kinds of stuff, and played and learned, you know, those skills through those correct ages of development. And sometimes children with disabilities don't necessarily have that opportunity. So this is what we're really working on with wheelchair basketball in BC and across Canada is having a really clear pathway so younger participants are able to get active and to get involved, and if they want to just play and have fun, that's great. If they want to take a more high performance route, then that's an option for them too. But just creating awareness and education about what's available and how to get involved and what the benefits are, I think, is really important to me now.

Sarah Smith 13:10

Okay, really cool. So getting that like exposure and building those skills early on, and just having that, like access to those sports.

Marni Abbott-Peter 13:17

Exactly.

Sarah Smith 13:18

Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. That's really cool, and I think really important as well. Because, I mean, from my own experience, when I went through public school, there wasn't a lot of exposure for para sport like generally, I don't think, and I know that they're starting to integrate that a bit more now, but I think it's really important and really cool that that's being done long overdue as well.

Marni Abbott-Peter 13:39

Certainly, yeah, and now inclusion is really in the forefront of people's minds, whether it's in school or in sport or career or whatever it might be. So it is good, and people you know have done the hard work, people like Terry Fox and Rick Hansen have really, you know, started and laid a great foundation for us Canadians to have opportunities in all of the different areas of life and have value in our society.