Episode 18 | Richard Peter Pt. 1

Sean Burdette 0:01

Hello and welcome to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. My name is Sean Burdette with the Vancouver Adapted Music Society, and today we have a very special guest with us, four-time Paralympian, Richard Peter. Richard, thank you so much for coming on. How's it going?

Richard Peter 0:15

Morning, Sean, thanks for inviting me, and I'm glad to come on join you guys today.

Sean Burdette 0:20

Awesome. So just starting off here, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Richard Peter 0:26

Hi there. Yeah, I guess. Gee. Where do I start? Let's just say, I'm Richard Peter, First Nations. I guess, let's see, role model, Paralympic athlete, Indigenous, starting research. Yeah, I guess I'm a multi faceted person at times.

Sean Burdette 0:45

It certainly sounds like, doing my research for this. You've lived quite an incredible life. Could you tell us a little bit about your disability?

Richard Peter 0:56

Sure, I'm a paraplegic. T-10 incomplete injury. I got injured way back in 1977 so I've been in a wheelchair, using a manual wheelchair, for close to 45 years. And so yeah, I guess that's the quick and easy.

Sean Burdette 1:13

Yeah. And how old were you when? When this happened?

Richard Peter 1:19

I'd actually just turned five years old, so I was going to preschool at that time, and, yeah, got injured in a vehicle crash, and so that's where I ended up in a chair, and then and learned how to use the wheelchair from an early age.

Sean Burdette 1:35

How did becoming a paraplegic initially change your life?

Richard Peter 1:40

I've had that chat with quite a few of my peers, because even there's some benefits of getting an injury as a young child in mainly that I've learned how to do everything from day one, from using a wheelchair. So that was one good experience. But you know, the flip side of that is I got injured back in the '70s living in a small town on Vancouver Island in Cowichan Valley, and so that was definitely a bit of a challenge. Also that, you know, some of the major cities like Vancouver, Toronto, you know, are very adapted and more accessible nowadays, but back in the 70s, in a small town, that was a bit more of a challenge, and so through a lot of support I did, you know, within the community and my family and even the city, that made it pretty, I'd say doable.

Sean Burdette 2:34

What sort of lifestyle changes did you have to make as a result of this?

Richard Peter 2:37

Oh, that's a tough question, I'm sure that changes throughout the years also. So, yeah, just growing up with a disability, you know, I definitely see, you know, how people react to you, and so that was one of the big things. Even, you know, I owe a lot of things to my parents and my mom, and that she was a teacher, and so she understood that when I got injured back then, part of the rules with education system, where that, "All right, we put you back into a special needs program you have a disability." But my mom fought for me to go through public school. And she said, "Well, his legs don't work, but his mind and his mouth and everything else still work normal," so to say. And so she fought for me to go through public school. And so that was definitely one of the first in my community. And so that was a bit of a challenge too, in that every school that I went to following that then had to be adapted. So most of the schools weren't wheelchair accessible at that time in the '70s and early '80s. So everything had to be adapted in some manner for me to attend.

Sean Burdette 3:46

Absolutely. Yeah, and I know it's still certainly an issue that we continue to face today, going off a little bit, putting that on the back burner and talking a little bit more about your athletic career. Could you tell us how you got into wheelchair basketball, like, of all the sports, why? Why wheelchair basketball?

Richard Peter 4:08

Actually, that's a bit of a long story on how I got involved in sports and then also wheelchair basketball. So me growing up, I think, you know, again, I'll talk and say, you know, I owe a lot to my family and that I had a lot of support. And then even I always said, I think growing up as kid, I always had that little chip on my shoulder and that, you know, when somebody else said, "No, you can't do that" I would always go, "No, I can do that." And, and I'm gonna fight and do it as and be as independent as possible. And so I've always grown up with that all my life that I'm like, "Alright, nope, I'm gonna get out here and do whatever I want and try to do the best that I can." So I've always grown up that way, and so I'd always play sports whenever I could. I had a large family, and so let's say, if we were playing baseball or hockey, you know, we all sort of adapted it. We did adaptive sports on our own, you know, back many years ago. And so they always did their best to include me and more of the sports and activities that we always play and do, and that was good for me, that I would always push then myself to play with the rest of my friends and family and at school too, against everybody who's running and jumping. So I had to push myself to be that strong and that fast. And so there's definitely, you know, good moments and bad moments at that time also. But it was, you know, it, I think it really helped me out in regards to sports. So really, I was going through life and doing everything fine on my own, and then a school program said, "Oh, Richard, we're gonna have a wheelchair basketball game at our school for Wheelchair Awareness Month." I think it was Accessibility Awareness Month. And so it was definitely something new for me, and at that, when I first heard about it, I'm like, "No, I don't need to partake. I'm fine. I'm happy doing what I'm doing. I'm okay." But the school and some classmates really said, "Richard, we want to you want to come on, give this try and you might enjoy it." And so I said, "All right, I'll give it a try. You know, just for you guys. And you guys invited the school, invited the team to come to our school." So this wheelchair basketball team from Victoria came up and did wheelchair sports, had a wheelchair basketball game against some of the students and teachers and some of the politicians in town, and so I went and played on our team and and that's where they really noticed how much talent I had. So all those years of me pushing against the rest of my family and friends who are running and jumping really made it easy for me to play against other peers in wheelchairs. And so that definitely made it a bit easier for me and so right then, that's when I realized, all right, I really enjoy wheelchair sports, and so that really opened up so many more doors for me. Right after that, I tried any sport that I could from, let's say tennis, wheelchair athletics, racquetball, basketball, gee, what else? Yeah, there's so many different sports that I tried, and still to this day, I was trying any other new sport, and I really enjoyed wheelchair basketball because it was a team sport. And so I think that's what I sort of gravitated towards, is I enjoyed team sports better, and mainly, I just love to travel too. That was one big thing that helped me get out there and enjoy also.

Sean Burdette 7:28

Absolutely. And my understanding is that this was also sort of the time that you began getting this nickname of the Bear, or "Bear." Could you tell us a bit about that?

Richard Peter 7:40

Yeah, that's a nickname that I've got, "The Bear," actually that's pretty funny, because even so when I was younger, of course, it was "Little Bear." And then I guess, as I grew, you know, I got just regular bear, and then also "Big Bear" at times, and so that mainly came through basketball, yeah, it's, I know within some Indigenous cultures and areas that they'll have some names like "Little Bear," or "Standing Bear" and so on, but mine was just a nickname, and so that was really good, I think it was mainly when I was a rookie and started to play at a higher level, getting close to the national team, a few of the coaches and the veterans on the team said, "All right, let's give all these rookies nicknames." And I remember, you know, so they all check out a few different names and and I guess I got lucky that one guy did say, "Oh, let's call him Little Billy," which, who knows where that came from. But then another guy said, "Well, let's call him Little Bear." And I think it was because there was another Indigenous player before me, who was Big Bear. And then I came around and said, "Oh, well, why don't, why don't we call him Little Bear?" And so I'm lucky that Bear stuck more than Little Billy. [Laughs] So that was, yeah, sort of a good, I guess, a good, lucky nickname for me, and that stuck all throughout and I think now it's more Gray Bear. [Laughs]

Sean Burdette 9:04

So you discovered wheelchair basketball in high school, I guess. Could you tell us a little bit about the process from when you first discovered the sport all the way to you completing your first Paralympic Games?

Richard Peter 9:21

Ooh, my history of wheelchair basketball, huh? So that was, um, I'd say, and even to this day, with any sport that I played, but with basketball too, that I really just got out and played because I enjoyed sports. I mean, that's huge within our Indigenous culture that, you know, we're very physically active and love, you know, many different sports at many different level. And sometimes, so that was a bit hard for me at times to because I just enjoyed going on to play and having a lot of fun, you know, like I said, doing some traveling, meeting new people, meeting other peers similar to myself. It's, I just enjoyed the game. But then a few coaches and teammates said, "Well, Richard, you should try out for the national team." And I never really had much of a thought for it. I'm like, "No, I'm fine doing

what I'm doing." And then I just happened to say, "All right, I'll go to this camp." And then the coach did say here, which was a national team selection camp. And, you know, of course, at that time, I didn't really think I was anywhere near to being the national team member. I think it was still very early on in my career. And then somehow the coach said, "Well, yes, you are good enough to be on the national team," and so that was, you know, that sort of happened quicker than I would have thought and and then I said, "All right, well, maybe I better start doing a bit more of getting into this sport and get more active with it and thinking national team thoughts," I guess.

Sean Burdette 10:55

Yeah, during that whole process, Was there really a moment that solidified this desire to go pro, or did it just sort of happen?

Richard Peter 11:08

No, yeah, I would say that, yeah, I don't know if there was. Again, I always just did it with enjoyment. And that's what I've always said toward the end of my career, that "All right, I'm still gonna play, if I still enjoy it," and when I don't enjoy it, then I'm like, "All right, maybe it is time to retire." Maybe, you know, to add more with thinking semi pro and that. You know, I played a bit down in the States with some teams, and then also went over to Europe and played in Germany and Italy, and some semi pro leagues over there and again, I only did that towards the end of my career, to get out there and sort of enjoy other cultures and be able to travel. I'm very fortunate that wheelchair basketball there is semi pro leagues there, throughout the world and in different countries, and so it's pretty great that I can say as a wheelchair basketball athlete, that I can get out there and go play in different countries. And so again, that's one part that I was able to sort of go, I guess, sort of enjoy my career. And yeah, so me and my wife went over to Europe and and lived over there for a couple of years. And so that was definitely a lot of fun and we had a good time. So I don't know if there was a moment that I said, "All right, I'm gonna go pro," or do whatever. But it was, you know, it was definitely a tough road, you know, I missed out, you know, with sport that I did a lot of travel. That was my first moment that I said, "Oh, I'd like to travel. I like to meet new people and do stuff." But then I started to when I got to a higher level of the national team, then there was a lot more travel, and so that took away from a lot of my family time, a lot of events that would happen back in my home community I missed out on and so that was always a bit of a challenge, too. So I always tossed back and forth. I'm like, "All right, should I be playing sport? Should I be back with my family?" And luckily, with a lot of support from my family, you know, when I'd be off on a basketball trip and you know, something would happen, I'm like, "Oh, I should leave this tournament and go back with my family?" And I'd probably call back home to my either my grandparents or are mom and

I think one day, my mom just said, "Well, no, Richard, we're, you know, we fully support you on your journey with sports." And then, yes, everybody understands, you know, why I wasn't there at those events, and is fully okay and accepting with it too. And so that really made it a bit easier. It's still tough for me to miss some events back home, especially right now with COVID. You know, a lot of people are missing many different events, and good and bad, and, you know, with their family or in different communities and so that was definitely a bit of a tough time for me. But like I said, I got a lot of support and also that, you know, they support me, and I'm glad that I could get out there, you know, as the Indigenous athlete in the Paralympic team or on the basketball team, and help share my culture too, and always promote within my culture, within wherever I travel, and with other people too. And so it's always good to share in both directions.

Sean Burdette 14:10

Absolutely. Could you tell us a little bit about the first time you won gold? What was, what was that experience like for you?

Richard Peter 14:20

Those are, those are pretty tough times. I mean, it's pretty awesome. You know, whenever you finally are able to reach your final goal of winning that gold medal, you know, we just had a good run with our athletes and Team Canada and our team. And so it was my second Paralympics that I attended, and we, you know, we're able to sort of pull up our socks. And said, "All right, let's, we want to reach the highest pinnacle." And so we, you know, set some goals as a team and individually. So, right, let's, this is where we've got to improve. And so when it finally happened, you know, yeah, some of us were like, "Oh my god, this is the best moment in my life." And I think for me. I was more just took a breath. I'm like, "Wow, that was a long, whatever, four or five years of hard work." And so I think that was it for me. Was like, all right, can I take a break and take a breath? Because that was the big thing, that it was never just that one game or those one moments that happens. It's actually always leading up to, you know, the three, four or five years that lead up to that game. So it's a lot of that hard work, you know, a lot of trips, lot of events, and a lot of training together, and sometimes a lot of training individually. And so that was, yeah, that was sort of the big thing there. Then, even it wasn't the next day, but then later on, you know, when it started, the next season happened, I was like, "All right. You know, we're sort of on top now. Now we got to do our best to try to stay on top."

Sean Burdette 15:50

Yeah.

Richard Peter 15:51

Yeah, because that was it. We sort of, we looked at the top teams that were out there and we said, "All right, we have to do, we don't have to equal what the top teams are. We've got to go a step above and raise the bar." And I think that was our theme of the year, that, all right, we got to raise the bar, that we wanted to train that much harder, wanted to make those extra sacrifices and do it to try to succeed as a team.

Sean Burdette 16:14

For sure, what would you say was the proudest moment in your career as an athlete?

Richard Peter 16:24

That's hard to say. You know, I definitely had a long career and had a lot of fun, so I always enjoy it, you know, especially, you know, it's very tough to say. Or, you know, when you enjoy some of those different accolades, but that's one of the big things, also that I'd say one of the biggest things is getting recognized with a Tom Longboat Award and being the top Aboriginal athlete, you know, with or without a disability. And so that was definitely a big honour to be recognized, you know, within my culture, back home and so it's always great to receive some of those different awards too. And you know, even with the BC Sports Hall of Fame to be included there, and you know, we have the Indigenous Sport Gallery down there also. And so it's great to be recognized on those different levels. But it's also, you know, some of the big moments are when I go back home and just share some of my stories and that's the big thing that you know, especially within the SCI spinal cord injury community and with disability that, you know, there's still not a lot of knowledge out there, so it's always great to get out there and share some information on that, share some information on the Paralympic movement and wheelchair sports and just being an advocate. So getting out there and because, you know, I'd say I got very lucky that, you know, I was able to given that opportunity to go and play sports and then reach sort of the highest level. I can talk about, you know, being from the ground roots to the podium level. The playground to podium, that's, you know, one of the common themes, too, and that, you know, I was just some kid on a small town reserve on Vancouver Island and then I made it to the highest level of winning the gold medal. And so, you know, I like to share that story, to get out there and let other young guys that are out there, or young athletes that are in different communities and think that aren't known, nothing like that can happen. It's like, well, yes, it can happen. But there's a lot of sacrifices, a lot of barriers that are there and so where there's will, there's a way.

Sean Burdette 18:24

Yeah, well put, you've mentioned a lot about how your family was a big support for you and you achieving this goal. Is there anyone else that was a real support for you? Any other pillars in your life or inspirations.

Richard Peter 18:43

Always, I mean, you know, coming from our, my home community, you know, our family was always very low income, so we've always had a lot of support within, you know, family and friends and even community, you know, the City of Duncan, and they've all supported in other groups, you know, and any within the disabled community, just wheelchair equipment, that is a huge barrier in trying to find a lot of different ends. Like, it's different for any other athlete that wants to go there and say, "Oh, I want to start playing soccer, or I want to try, you know, skating and or skiing." And, you know, soccer, you can just go and buy some soccer boots and a ball. But, you know, for skiing or skating, you got to buy a bit more equipment. Cost a little more, but it's even match that much more of a challenge within the SCI community that I've got to buy a specific chair or a specific piece of equipment for that event. And not all of the sporting equipment for para sports is available at Canadian Tire. You know, it's, harder to find and more expensive. So like each of my chairs, you know, can cost anywhere from five to over $10,000 for me to go and try different sports. So that's sometimes tough. When I say, I play a lot of different sports, but it's when I can, that you know, I'll get a basketball chair here and maybe a tennis chair. And now I've got a hand cycle that I ride my hand bike at times too. And, so there's, you know, whatever sport that's out there, I'll try to, whatever equipment I have that I can try to get out there and give it a go too. And so that makes it a bit of a challenge. So, wheelchair equipment, that's always great. So Wheelchair Sports, BC Wheelchair Basketball, Canadian Paralympic Committee. They've always been huge supporters and making that equipment available. So they have what's called the wheelchair loan program. I'm working out with Wheelchair Sports, and they have the Indigenous Bridging the Gap program, and so that's to get out to Indigenous communities and find more athletes and players and introduce them to the sport, but also provide some equipment either at a very low cost, they can get out there and make it affordable, because that's the big thing is, you know, even if I first tried that wheelchair basketball back when I was a teenager, but if I wasn't given that support of equipment or a place to play then, then I wouldn't have, wouldn't be here talking to you today. So there's always a lot of supports from different groups that have always made that happen, you know, especially financially, but equipment wise and then even travel. Like I didn't have any wheelchair basketball in my hometown of Duncan, so I had to travel down to Victoria, which, luckily for me, was pretty close, and which is about an hour south of Duncan on a good day. I'm sure it's close to an hour and a half nowadays, but yeah, so it's good that I had an opportunity to get over there and play, and then once I sort

of exceeded that, that level of practice, and then I moved over to Vancouver, where there was a big hub of sports in Vancouver. And so that's when I moved over to Vancouver and started playing at a higher level.

Sean Burdette 21:49

Right on. You've touched on this a bit, but of course, you know, you're not just an athlete, you're also a massive advocate for the SCI community. Could you tell us a little bit about BC Wheelchair Sports Association?

Richard Peter 22:03

Actually, yeah, I just started talking a bit more about that, even with the Indigenous Bridging the Gap. So Bridging the Gap is a program that introduces sport and recreation to different community members. So mainly, let's say, if a community, let's say Victoria, or even Duncan said, "Oh, we'd like, you know, Wheelchair Sports to come out and introduce some different sports." And so we'd bring some equipment, some coaches and possibly some athletes, and get out there and introduce sport, whether it be wheelchair basketball, wheelchair tennis, athletics, so that's the main sports that Wheelchair Basketball has. But then, you know, there's always many other sports that are out there too they try to introduce and can pass off some information to you. So that's been huge for me, and when I first got involved, I really didn't know any of the sports and programs that were out there. But then I got introduced to wheelchair basketball and wheelchair sports and that's where I was able to go to different programs, whether it be a summer camp or, you know, a sport camp, and just find out about many different activities and sports and opportunities, and mainly just to learn from other peers, like when I grew up in my hometown, that I was, I think there's two of us that were in wheelchairs and we were very different. I was, you know, a young kid in a manual chair, and the guy beside me was, another young kid, I think he was a year or two older, but he was in a power chair. So we didn't quite, couldn't do the same things, same events and same activities. And so once I got involved into para sport, wheelchair sports, that I then could talk to other peers that had similar, that were in the same situation that I was in. And so I learned a lot of different things, even from, you know, that's how I learned how to drive, you know, get out there and learn how to travel. And, you know, just learned a lot more different things from a lot of different peers and friends that I've had all my life. And so it's definitely been a good journey. And, and I will say, you know, it opens doors. Wheelchair Sports opened many doors for me, and that's one of the biggest things that I've really enjoyed, that it's not just introduced me to sport, but introduced me to many different things and that's what I always try to do now, that whenever, you know, I would never say that I'm an advocate, but I'm here to try to help introduce other people to other possibilities that I was given. And so I try to, like to open those doors for other

members, whether they're, you know, in the SCI community and the Indigenous community and just, you know, bit of everywhere. So that's one big thing with Indigenous Bridging the Gap. You know, try to get out there and introduce sport to anybody else who could be the next up and coming star too.