

Transcript: Resilience/Overcoming Challenges: Perspectives from GB Para-Athlete 'Adventure Andy'

Host: Alana MacLeod

Guest Speaker: Andy MacLeod

Alana MacLeod: 0:01

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands careers and employability centre. In this episode we'll be talking about resilience, ambition, and life in the adventure sector. I'm Alana MacLeod and today I'm joined by Andy McLeod, Team GB para athlete, motivational speaker, adventure sports instructor and UHI alumnus. Andy, thank you for joining us today.

Andy Macleod: 0:25

Hello, how are you?

Alana MacLeod: 0:26

Good. Yeah, looking forward to hearing all about your journey. So we'll kick off Andy – you studied at West Highland college UHI. Can you tell us a bit about your time there and the course that you completed?

Andy Macleod: 0:40

No problem at all. Yeah, and I actually fully filled in my UCAS application to arrange of both music and psychology courses. But then I discovered the university of the highlands and islands prospectus with a course on adventure Tourism Management. I had no idea at this point that you could actually have a career in the outdoors eh and seeing that it was in Fort William New Fort William for the mountain biking side of things and I thought of course with likeminded people I wanted to apply for sure. Mountain Biking for life that was the dream, absolutely. The careers advisor then contacted the college directly and I got an application form and just applied straight to them and I was accepted over the moon with that even pre attendance there was people had been in touch with online that were also joining the course obviously looking to share accommodation and that sort of thing. I got on really well straight away with them. I know you should be waiting with people you meet online and etc. Well, it was pretty safe in a private group like that. We're all still friends and keep in touch and this is 10 years since we met Now.

Alana MacLeod: 1:43

I think that is really, that's really key about the adventure group and the students and in Fort William, it's very much a community isn't it?

Andy Macleod: 1:52

Absolutely, it's a really great place.

Alana MacLeod: 1:55

Yeah, yep. And so, Andy in 2011 you were hit by a car He suffered life changing injuries. Despite all of this, you have returned to Fort William, you finished your degree, you gained additional specialist qualifications. And now you are a member of the Great British para snowboard team, not to mention running with the Olympic torch and the Commonwealth baton and everything in between. Would you mind telling us a wee bit more about your journey from the time of the accident to where you are now?

Andy MacLeod:

Yes, of course. The accident itself, I don't remember anything about that at all. And I was on my bicycle cycling to a friend's house for a barbecue and I was hit by a car travelling approximately over twice the speed limit and a third is on my leg was amputated. And I received a traumatic brain injury as well, which left me with attention concentration and memory issues. I was very, very lucky to survive and nobody of course would see it to begin with, I could or couldn't still do. Nobody would want to set me up to fail or to be disappointed or anything, anything like that. And so I realised pretty quickly, the only way that I would find out what I could still do was by trying. I got my first prosthetic leg about three months after the accident. And then I was actually back on my bike about five months after the accident. When you get a prosthetic leg at first you start off waiting a half an hour, three times a day, just going to build up from there. And I sacrificed some time just having my leg on. So like now five or 10 minutes just cycling up and down the street on my bike, just absolutely bike mad. But I returned to university The following year then, who were all very supportive and really was and what happened. I didn't want to let what had happened to me hold me back at all. While I was still attending uni and trying to do my coursework, I had a lot of rehabilitation appointments and even compensation assessment appointments and things like that. So there was loads of travel back and forth from Fort William down to the central belt. So there was some serious juggling of plates and still fighting pain to ride my bike and learn to snowboard as well. I'd only actually snowboard twice pre-accident that was something I always wanted to do but I didn't know anybody that did it or how to get into it at all. And then of course joining that course in Fort William pretty much everybody on the course was either a skier or snowboarder so I was able to start it that way and I believe apparently I picked up pretty quickly, emmm loved it...absolutely loved it. A in June in one of my years out from university I did quite a bit of volunteer work with some sports charity, that was through them I became aware of the para snowboard team in the compensation case going on for as long as it did kind of stopped me a joining them and paying for the last one or Paralympics, in which case I joined an able bodied kind of pathway training team in the meantime just to get my foot in the door as it were - Pardon the pun!

And then joined the GB able bodied pathway team, then trailed with the Olympic team. Last year, I got a wildcard entry into a World Cup race because I didn't have an opportunity to kind of do one of the qualifier research races prior to this. And I still managed to get top 10 finish. So that was me then joined the team. And this year my second season competing on the World Cup level. And my best result was fifth a third Well, sorry, I finished overall fifth in the World in bank slalom this year, which I'm still struggling to comprehend myself. And I missed out on a podium finish by point five of a second, which isn't even the blink of an eye. So I'm basically turning that.

Alana MacLeod: 5:41

I'd count it, too!

To me, I mean, you're the epitome of resilience, to be quite honest. And we always talk about that and the university and day to day life and when you're thinking about your career, it's really important. The accident and its consequences, there's been many, have not stopped you from achieving incredible things clearly. I wondered if you could tell our listeners a wee bit about your thoughts on resilience and on goal setting.

Andy Macleod:

Indeed, yeah. I have been through a lot and faced many challenges, em and a lot of people it's been often said I don't know how you do it I don't know how you stay positive and things like that. And like I think we need to kind of go back to when I was growing up, em I had an interest in psychology and through that I used to meditate quite a bit and people kinda snuff their noses at things like that, like meditating, but it definitely has helped me be such a positive person.

Pre accident I won the only award in my high school which was voted for by the people in my year. Which was for the most inspirational person for having the most positive outlook on life. And like that even after the accident when it happened there was some people even said to me, like, don't take this in a bad way. But I literally can't think of a better person this could happen to, because you have just picked yourself up and carried on and go back mountain biking, back snowboarding and everything like that. And so, like, I think a lot of it has just has to do with perspective. Like, I could look back at everything that I've been through and the struggle I had, or I could look back and think of the achievements of overcoming all these difficulties. It's the same things I'm remembering. It just turns the whole feeling from negative to positive. And even in the moment if things are hard, I have cried I have had breakdowns. I've had a lot of counselling and even been on antidepressants. You do sometimes definitely need that release and that help emotionally and physically, but you need to not focus on it and get stuck there which is very easy to do. Just get stuck in that kind of state. And but you have to you have to look to the end see to see the light At the end of the tunnel as people say, or make changes in your life that you're resisting, even with all the support that I had, after the accident, there were certain things that people couldn't do for me that I had to do for myself. To be blunt, I kind of realised crying and moaning about things wasn't going to resolve some things. It wasn't going to make my leg grow back. I had to accept what happened to me and get used to what my life was now, and realise there's kind of no benefit on dwelling on the past or what could have been. I needed to focus on what could still be what I could still achieve. Big goals definitely are important, but daunting and a big challenge. So it's very important to say little achievable goals that help you get to that big end goal. And don't beat yourself up, especially if you don't achieve a goal. Just accept it. Think of what you can do in future which might work instead.

Alana MacLeod: 8:57

Yeah, absolutely. And I think a lot of what you said there will resonate with many of our students and our graduates and our listeners and you know, maybe staff as well.

Andy Macleod: 9:07

Let's hope so!

Alana MacLeod: 9:10

Tell us what it's like to train for defeating Winter Olympics. It's so cool.

Andy Macleod: 9:18

Absolutely, it's, it's very exciting. I still don't fully accept myself as an elite athlete. But apparently it's true. Over the years, I've met so many people who've been through similar accidents and are still going through pain and complications years later, which just makes me so grateful that I'm lucky enough to be able to still do these sports never mind to have reached the level that I have. I definitely I do I do and I push what I can achieve for them and for those people, and I'm honoured that I can inspire and motivate people through all of this as well.

Alana MacLeod: 9:53

Brilliant, brilliant. No, it's very exciting and we'll all be watching you closely I'm sure. You're obviously great advocate of the benefits of an active lifestyle you've mentioned, you know, mountain biking, running snowboarding. How do you think that this active lifestyle can help people when it comes to mental health?

Andy Macleod: 10:14

The Outdoors definitely is amazing. It's probably one of the best and the most accessible things for people and their mental health. And like I advocate it, however, and wherever I can, and not even doing the extreme things that I do like taking an elderly or less abled person out to just a viewpoint carpark. Even in the rain, they don't have to leave the car is such a rewarding experience, even if it's just a change of scene for them and complaining about the weather, you know, just sort of little changes that can bring so much benefit.

On the sporting side, the outdoors, often puts people outside of their comfort zone. I heard recently about a group of people who were scared to walk through a field of cows like I mean, I know cows are dangerous, but they're no more dangerous and the roads that we cross every single day. and overcoming challenges in such a setting where you are completely safe and people have taken the most measures to make sure that you are safe. overcoming challenges in those situations, builds your confidence in yourself and that's transferable to other areas of life as well and maybe even encourages people to take like more calculated risks and eventually hopefully be more successful in life.

Alana MacLeod: 11:25

Yeah, yeah. And actually I think COVID the whole situation with them locked down and stuff I don't know about for a year base, but certainly where I am, just outside of Inverness, there's been so many more people out and about on bikes and running and things and it's just so they can get out and clear their head and yeah, it's been em...interesting.

Andy Macleod:

Yeah, definitely. It's been really good to see. My own mother's been got back on her bike after 30 years. Like I've got my qualifications in the bikeability, cycling proficiency. So I even had had her out in the high school playground like putting the cones out, like teaching her because I know myself what can happen to a very safe and responsible cyclist on the roads, never mind someone who's kind of just getting back into things and hopefully I think there's gonna be a big resurgence in people just using their bikes and for commuting and enjoying the outdoors more for sure. Really excited to see that.

Alana MacLeod: 12:25

Yeah, let's hope it continues. You mentioned earlier on that you've done a lot of volunteering. Can you tell us a wee bit about what you think the value of volunteering is both for others, you know, the people that you're working with and perhaps helping and for your own personal development?

Andy Macleod: 12:43

Yes, definitely. Volunteering, it allows you to impact other people's lives in a positive way. No matter how small it seems to you. Your experience in life and the things that you are you do, and you can do maybe incredibly valuable to others who have never had such opportunities. And often you don't even realise that and seeing how other people's lives are also teaches you to be grateful of what you have, so you kind of learn from each other. It's great for meeting people and making contacts – both meeting the people that are sort of using the service or that you're actually helping out but also the service providers and people in the industry as well, I mean it was through my volunteering that I actually got in contact was put in contact with the para snowboard team. So, I literally wouldn't have got to where I am at least anywhere near as quickly, had I not volunteered when I did and got to meet the people that I did.

Alana MacLeod: 13:41

Yeah, it's developed your network I suppose. And also so yeah, you're making a difference but you're also developing really important skills and contacts and everything that will help you in your future, whether it be in your job or your like, you know, your social life maybe too.

Your story is completely inspirational. There might be students graduates listeners out there who are thinking about, you know, challenging situations that they might be facing, or have faced in the past. So, I wonder if you could maybe talk a bit about seeing the opportunities and making the most of challenging situations, you know, being determined to chase your dreams, no matter what stands in your way.

Andy Macleod: 14:23

Definitely, there are opportunities everywhere if you look for them. If you don't take any opportunities, then you're just quite simply not going to progress anywhere in life. I'm not saying it's an easy process, but if you really set your mind to something you can achieve something, even if you

can't do something the same way that other people have done it, you can find your own way to get there and to achieve something similar in your own way. So you mentioned COVID in the current Situations going on at the moment. I actually feel that everyone is going through a similar experience right now as to what I had losing my leg. Em so it's like through sort of through no fault of your own, there's been restrictions and difficulties and challenges put upon you, you can focus on what you've lost and what you're Not able to do right now. Or you can use this time to develop and turn your life into something you truly want and are passionate about. Even if you just take more time for yourself rather than chasing the rat race of success, which so many people do nowadays and just get caught up in it and they don't realise that life's passing them by. Quite simply, life is not going to go back to what it was before COVID, no time soon anyway, and I do feel the sooner people accept that and start looking to the future, what they can still do, the easier this whole journey will be and hopefully you can maybe actually take some positive out of this situation as well.

Alana MacLeod: 15:53

Yeah, I think, you know, people being locked down working from home so I think it's, it's given people a lot of time to reflect maybe, you know, if they maybe are on the right path, are there opportunities that might come from this situation that they could grasp at. So, yeah, you're right. It's what you make of it really isn't it? Andy those were all the questions I had for you. But is there anything that you want to communicate about your time at West Highland college or what you're doing now, or any advice For students and graduates that you want to pass on?

Andy Macleod: 16:39

I think it's just important for people to, I guess to kind of not focus too much on kind of living up to other people's expectations and like chase what you want in life. Do what you want to do, don't compare yourself to other people. like, other People are other people they can they can do what they want to achieve what they achieve, but if you focus on other people and compare yourself to them then you've got much greater likelihood of disappointment and feeling lost in yourself and just disheartened. I've really compared myself to myself. As long as I'm better than yesterday and I'm progressing in some sort of way, then I'm happy. I'm definitely, I'm winning like...like I say, I'm incredibly privileged to have achieved everything that have in life already. That alone is an achievement. Anything I get on top of that is a bonus, so we'll see what happens.

Alana MacLeod: 17:42

Brilliant, That's great. Thank you so much!

So, to wrap up, we will all suffer setbacks, doors that close, and things that go astray, but developing the ability to remain focus bones back Still move forward positively and confidently is so very important. Andy, thank you so much for joining me today and telling us more about your journey and to our listeners, thanks for tuning in. And just a quick reminder that after completing your qualification that you are a graduate for life. This means that you can access careers and employability advice and gain same point students and Graduates can get in touch via the future me system, targetconnect.uhi.ac.uk or by emailing careers@uhi.ac.uk. So visit the website for more information.

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