

Sports, Stories and Social Responsibility

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It is through stories that communities throughout history have engaged the minds of their youth. Sports today can provide a wealth of instructive stories for life skills. Generations of youth can be motivated to achieve their full potential. Creating value for society can be included among performance criteria.

In February 2009 during my human powered circumnavigation I landed on the shores of Papua New Guinea. Upon my arrival Philip, a villager told me "*Now even the villagers on the hills know about you, the man who came in a yellow boat,*" Philip along with other villagers come out from shore in four dugout canoes, traditional vessels with an outrigger on one side. A lone truck driver had spotted me at sea earlier from a dirt road on a hill and had driven ahead to alert them in the Kamlawā village located a few miles north of Finsch Harbor.

While bailing water from his own canoe with a tin can Philip with a happy attitude said "we came to rescue you." I was in a purpose built ocean rowing boat in which I had just spent 21 days on the Bismarck Sea was not in any danger. With gratitude I thanked them and when they confirmed that a wharf was available where I could tie my boat. I rowed my boat there with the company of their four canoes. I could hear the children from the Kamlawā village screaming in joy as they ran along the waterfront weaving among shrubs and coconut trees. A crowd had gathered at the dockside, and watched me patiently for three days; taking their turns to intently watch my every move on the boat.

During the first two days, it was the men who formed a wall of flesh on the edge of the wharf with their long bushknives which is their universal farming tool, held firmly in their hands. If I didn't know any better, I could have felt threatened. Later on, the women began to approach and with them came children of various ages. The earlier stares with intent without saying a word, were replaced with playtime and the wharf became their playground, I was amazed to watch their amazing and daring diving stunts.

It is a curious experience to have become part of a local legend in a far away land. I wonder how the story will differ after a few generations and what the children will hear from their elders about my journey which touched their community. I also had visited a primary school while in Kamlawā, I don't know if any of my own stories were ever incorporated into the local version.

When asked to explain what I was doing, I had told them that I was on a walkabout and that I was a storyteller, that I visited different places on my journey and gathered stories. My job was to become the best storyteller. I explained that I was going to tell about the kindness that I had received in Kamlawā for example, and the world was going to know.

In March 2003 while the Alaska Highway was still snow packed, I rode my bicycle through Fort Nelson in northern British Columbia in Canada toward Alaska. Earlier while at Fort St. John also in British Columbia further south, a First Nations man had brought his two children to meet me for breakfast, asking me to "tell them about my vision." They perceived my journey as a vision quest, a journey toward wisdom. They then had alerted the Fort Nelson First Nation of my arrival unbeknownst to me. I was greeted on the highway at Fort Nelson and invited to visit the Chalo Elementary School in their village.

Though a common occurrence during the tourist season, I was the only bicyclist on the icy roads at that time. I was on a bicycle with studded tires, carrying front and rear panniers and towing a trailer loaded with my climbing gear for a climb of Mt. McKinley in Alaska. Wearing heavy clothing to stay warm, keeping a water bladder next to my back to keep it from freezing, I was a spectacle on the move. I have learned that everyone sees what I do through their own mind's eye, and that their life experiences determine what they see in what I do. Children were no different.

"Aren't you afraid?" they asked me, and when I enquired what I should fear, they would tell me about their own fears. "Aren't you afraid of the bears?" "It is winter, they are asleep." "Aren't you afraid of the trucks?" "They change lanes." "Aren't you afraid of loneliness?" "I got you" and so on. I urged them to think that fear should not stop us from what we envision to do. We usually fear from what we don't know, but by seeking knowledge we can learn how to handle fear. Without realizing the children were telling me about their fears, and all the reasons for why they would not attempt to do about what I was doing. I demonstrated and told them that with proper preparation hard work it is possible to accomplish to our "dreams." I would later realize that if I slightly detached myself from the encounter, I could have taken on the role of a virtual mirror.

Questions asked about my journey would give me hints about the individuals asking them.

I always found the fourth through eighth grade students to be the best age group to address. I could hold their attention through a structured presentation. For them anything was possible, children of this age group are open minded and they appreciate that the world is a big place, exciting adventurist stories can captivate them. With younger children I learned that the best contribution I could make is to spend quality time together; talk about bugs and bears, share pictures of the creatures of this world etc. I play along, allow them to set the pace and to dwell on any image that entertains and teaches them. The important thing is that each has an example or an idea about how a lifetime involvement with sports could help someone.

In all of my primary school level gatherings, I have been serving to create a series of learning moments to grab their full attention, which could be used to deliver important messages to remember. My messages are woven into my stories like the fables of *La Fontaine*; I touch on my own mistakes which they should avoid, I regularly engage them in topics including wellness and caring for the environment.

I am fifty years old now, and I like having children guess my age. I ask children about what one needs to do to maintain a level of fitness for what I do. They usually offer ideas from good food, sufficient sleep, to regular exercise. Then I reverse that same question to their health concerns, my goal is to leave them with a nonsmoking message. If they don't smoke they can play catch with their grandchildren, I tell them, knowing full well that most grandparents are no longer physically active. These children crave such attention and my message resonates with them so they will not forget.

Power of Dreams

Dreams are the fertile ground where the future is shaped. Beware what you think for you may decide to act on it, I had read somewhere. From a young age I have involved in various forms of sports and physical cultural activities. At the age 5, along with my father I climbed to Mt. Erciyes, 11000 feet almost 4000 meter an extinct volcano in south central Turkey. When I was in middle school, our teachers brought a black and white television to the classroom then told us to pay attention. We watched the astronauts walk on the moon that day. I had read Jules Verne books, been watching Jacques Cousteau documentaries, and I was ready for the obvious leap of imagination. I can be an astronaut, I thought to myself. Given time though, I reasoned in my child's mind that all astronauts were American but I was not, therefore I could not be, I wrongfully concluded, unaware of cosmonauts at the time, and never pursued the thought from then on. No teacher was aware of my internal processing; they had not done any follow up exercises after the events. My parents could not have known; I was a boarding student.

When I was at the age of 15, I was in Belgium where I came across an issue of the National Geographic magazine dedicated to the 1963 American first ascent of Everest. I had to look up the word *bivouac* in the dictionary to understand the articles. I can climb Everest, I told myself then. Perhaps because I was older by that time, that idea has never left me since.

In 1997 at age 36, I found myself standing often in front of a world map hanging on the wall of our software development lab in Washington, DC in United States. I was pursuing a fairly successful consultancy career yet when I shifted my gaze out the window, I pictured myself on the final steps of a difficult snowbound summit, or on a steep bigwall climb. My dreams never had any corner offices or worldly possessions. Visualization had been happening, wiring my brain in different ways than required for a life in the office.

That world map had the Americas on the right, the Pacific Ocean in the middle and the Old World on the left. I traced my finger over that map one day right to left from Washington, DC to Turkey, and even gave it a name: "Journey Home." What if, I asked, what if I could do it by human power? That became a quiet obsession followed by numerous how-questions. How would I find the time, how would I obtain the funding? Each how question was a problem to be solved. It was easy tracing paths on a map; maybe I would not stop in Turkey and I would keep going until I returned back to DC. I would have to contend with crossing the Atlantic Ocean on my way, which is when I

discovered the Ocean Rowing Society in London. As an engineer I was already wired as a problem solver, now I was on familiar turf.

Peer pressure

There is only one thing that is certain in life which holds true for all ages: if we believe that we cannot be, then our subsequent actions ensure that outcome. However if we begin with the belief that we can, our whole intention changes, we recompose to apply our time and resources toward that positive goal, focusing our energies to make it happen. Our place in the world is the result of consecutive decisions that we have made at critical junctions in our lives; those decisions were necessarily aligned with our goals and the probability of success that we assigned the same. Children don't know that yet, and I want them to catch each other whenever they utter the words "I can't" -- an expression which comes so naturally to them.

Call me devious, I trick the students after I share my astronaut story, by asking them who wants to be an astronaut. Many times it is something none of them had even considered. One or two hands go up often with hesitation but invariably few others laugh at these future cadettes. That scenario never fails, always providing me with the opportunity to talk about negative peer pressure.

In adults, this takes on a different form where cynicism is billed as critical thinking. When I shared my thoughts with others about Journey Home early on, I quickly found out that not everyone needed to know. Have you done anything like that before, was a typical response. Books never turned me down; one of the books that I read was titled *Ultimate High* about the Swede Göran Kropp, who had bicycled from Sweden to Nepal towing his climbing gear on a trailer, and had climbed Everest solo in 1996.

When I finally met Göran in person in Seattle during the summer of 2001, his first two questions to me were: when are you starting, and, do you have sponsors. I later hesitated about whether to begin my journey on account of the 9/11 events which provided another excuse to wait. When we later met in Ouray Ice Park in Colorado in the winter of 2012, Göran would ask me "haven't you started yet?" I remember feeling uncomfortable giving my excuses. That is an example to positive peer pressure.

When I declared in 2003 that I was going to bicycle from Seattle to Alaska in winter conditions to climb Mt. McKinley, I knew to ignore the cynicism. If I bicycled 50 miles a day, I knew I could reach Alaska by mid-April before my team arrived for our scheduled climb in May. Those who asked whether I had bicycled that far before, did not bother showing up at the starting line on February 1st.

Children need to hear such stories often to learn to identify around them the few nurturing individuals who will affirm their aspirations and to avoid those who will damage their self-esteem. Our legal counsel Christopher Beer had told me when we were filing to establish Around-n-Over: "surround yourself with good people and the dream

will take care of itself" -- likewise we often tell children to choose their friends well, for good reason.

Willingness to commit

Dreams do not become reality without deliberate action. I remember myself uttering "a dream without action is only a pipedream" during a presentation to students at the Hutch School in Seattle for children of families with cancer.

Everything has a price, there is no free lunch. It is easy to remain in our comfort zone to avoid the tough choices in fear of failure. I used to think that when I found sponsors I could begin my journey. I had a career to enhance and a job which paid the bills. Mortgage on a condo with a lake view near downtown Seattle required a steady income. I was a creature of habits, wanting certainty before action.

In September 2002, I received an email from Göran telling me that he was back at his home in Issaquah east of Seattle after another ascent of Everest. We quickly made a plan to go rock climbing for the first time together in eastern Washington State. Unfortunately Göran fell that day on a relatively short pitch and died while on my belay. That event shook me deep within, forced a reconsideration of my priorities. I was not one to hide in a corner feeling sorry for myself. What came out of that accident was a firm belief that I was the chosen one, that there was a reason for why I was there, and that life was short.

During the flight on the way back from Göran's funeral in November that year, I drew the world map on a piece of paper and marked the highest summit on each continent except Mt. Vinson in Antarctica. I would carry out my circumnavigation, and I would also reach each of these six summits by human power to honor Göran's memory. First to reach was the highest summit in North America, namely Mt. McKinley in Alaska.

When I contacted Göran's sponsors, I received a loud silence. Before the accident that would have been a valid excuse to postpone the journey. The time for excuses was over; no longer were they going to dictate my destiny. With the blessing of Nancy, my then fiancée, I cashed out my retirement funds and began pedaling north. Before my departure, the legal paperwork for Around-n-Over was filed, my living will and powers of attorney were left in Nancy's care. Our team summited McKinley on 29 May, and Nancy married me in Alaska after my descent.

This was only the beginning. Following my return, our second car and the condo were sold in favor of lesser expenses. We rented first, then bought a townhouse at half the mortgage obligation. We took action to roll equity from another property I had owned in Washington, DC into a profitable rental unit. We took advantage of lower mortgage rates to reduce our monthly expenses.

By the time I launched on the Pacific Ocean in 2007 to begin my westbound circumnavigation, I had bought and provisioned my rowboat and had used it once already for a practice row from the Canary Islands near northwestern Africa to the Caribbean

Sea. Nancy and I had rearranged our lives to survive on one salary, totally committing ourselves to the journey. I had even gained Aktaş Holding from Turkey as a major sponsor. The departure became possible after the tough choices we had made together with Nancy.

That day at the Hutch School, I was in front of children a family member of whom was under treatment for cancer. I told them that death will happen around us in our lifetime. Rather than death itself, we could focus on what to do with that experience. After Göran's death, I had changed my own path drastically, yet they were still so young. Could they start by telling how they loved the ailing one, or promise the same one that they will be strong, caring, honorable, hard working individuals with integrity and honesty?

The question perhaps all of us should ask ourselves is whether we should wait for a disruptive event like death, or layoff, or divorce, or childbirth to shake our foundation before we take the proverbial first step on a journey of a thousand miles.

Creating value for the society

When preparing for my journey in the aftermath of Göran's accident, I felt the need to incorporate the venture. I was introduced to our legal council Christopher Beer with whom to consider our options. A nonprofit corporation with a mission to educate and inspire children was the outcome. I did not want my journey to turn into a chest beating exercise and I was passionate about creating opportunities toward children's education.

Once we had a stable board of directors, our charitable work became better defined. We seized opportunities to partner with another nonprofit called İLKİYAR to help boarding school students at primary school age in rural Turkey, and with African Environments in Arusha on the foothills of Mt. Kilimanjaro to build additional classrooms at a local secondary school.

As athletes, we often receive generous support from the society; recognition is just one of the rewards that come with success. We have a choice to handle that success responsibly and to pay back the society for the privilege. When that any worthy endeavor can be leveraged to benefit the society becomes our intention, we will find the ways. I was never invited to schools when I was working as an engineer. Now that I am, influencing the next generation through my stories is just one of the ways.

Motivation through goal setting

What if I cannot finish my circumnavigation, was one of my questions early on. It was such a huge undertaking, daunting in scope and overwhelming in duration. In front of me was a typical fishbone diagram which fed input from four distinct boxes into one which represented results and success. The four boxes to populate had men, money, materials and methods as their respective titles. But to what end? The final box contained the key...

If I engage as many children as possible to broaden their horizons, run an accountable nonprofit true to its mission, create as much value as possible for my sponsors, and make as many friends as possible around the world during my journey, then I will be in keeping with my intentions.

When I focused on our performance along the way rather than on the outcome at the end, the fog lifted, I gained clarity of purpose. I could take this seemingly impossible goal, which was literally as big as the world, and then divide it into tangible relevant bite-size intermediate goals. Perhaps our team members could take on some of these tasks, and with their individual skills could deliver better results. I certainly did not have the time to juggle all of the responsibilities. My job is to improve the significance of our nonprofit programs, to better myself through the wisdom gained during my journey, and to enhance the quality of my observations for better storytelling. If world events got in the way, or an ailing family member became a priority in my life, I could look back and say: "we've done well!"

The US Marines have coined the expression: "difficult we can do now; impossible will take longer." What they left out of "difficult" was whether it was realistic. Every step along the way toward that long term goal has to consist of achievable short term goals. If dreams give us ideas, it is goals that provide us with the roadmap. If these goals are very specific and performance can be measured upon their completion, we can then press ourselves for meeting timelines. If we are falling short on resources such as time, money or talent, we can consider prioritizing the tasks. Unless there are dependencies among the tasks where one cannot begin the next step until completion of the previous, then prioritizing will relieve the pressure for performance. At any given moment, the top three focus areas can be retired once addressed and a new selection can replace them. It is the pursuit of excellence, not perfection which makes the difference. And none of this is possible unless we can take a moment to think ahead and make a plan.

I was able to overcome the inertia created by an unwieldy dream by breaking it down into stages. Then by seeing progress as a result of my efforts, I was able to remain motivated and to maintain my momentum.

Dream big

If we know how to handle big dreams by defining a long term goal and breaking it down to its intermediate milestones, then we should not fear big dreams. In other terms, an insignificant dream will mean underachievement of our potential.

Taking part in the Olympics is every athlete's dream, and why not? As long as the athlete and the coaches and the administrators surrounding the athlete are all aware of the seriousness of the undertaking, it can be a valid dream. Measuring our performance against others who are best in their field will magically force us to set higher standards for ourselves. Other than nature versus nurture debates which could be had at this point, limited time also has to be considered.

If we accept that we have a limited time to achieve our dreams, then big dreams will mean many small steps or fewer more significant steps to achieve. My human powered circumnavigation can be a good example.

This circumnavigation will be finished when I return to California hopefully in the summer of 2012, after a five year struggle. Yet just in the process of bringing my journey so far, I have become the first person to have rowed three oceans and the first person to have rowed the Indian Ocean mainland to mainland between Australia and Africa. I hold the Guinness World Record for the longest time at sea by a solo rower by 312 days, and I remain the most experienced ocean rower alive in total career days at sea by 655 days as of October 10, 2011.

I am writing this article on a small PDA while rowing across the South Atlantic from Lüderitz in Namibia to Central America. By the time I am done, my total career days will probably exceed 800. I did not set out to gather all these specific records, yet I was reaching for such a big goal in my circumnavigation that they had to happen along the way.

Manage the dream

The beauty of intermediate goals is that they provide milestones toward success. Each milestone achieved is a taste of success. Repeated often times, success becomes a habit, it becomes an acquired skill, it is not accidental. We build on past successes as well as failures as we learn from our mistakes.

Wearing a typical project manager's hat, I divide my journey into stages, and those into phases. Each stage requires planning, then preparation, then execution then an evaluation phase. US Rangers have their 6P's: "prior planning prevents piss poor performance." Based on my plans, I then have to prepare myself. Preparations may include physical fitness, gaining the additional skills as necessary, gathering the equipment and supplies, prepositioning them for logistical ease, getting visas or permits and finding funding. When I execute the plan I use the fruits of these preparations to move my journey forward. Evaluation is a time when I reflect on the phase I just completed, learn from my mistakes, and identify weaknesses or areas to improve, then acknowledge and reinforce the good parts. The cycle is complete when I am ready to incorporate these learning in the planning phase of the next stage.

To move my journey across PNG (Papua New Guinea) for example, I had to plan and prepare for beach walking, sea kayaking, hiking through tropical mountain paths, then rowing. Before departure for PNG, I had to arrange for the delivery of my rowboat to Port Moresby which is PNG's capital city on the Coral Sea, and my cycling rig to Australia, each ahead of my arrival. I had to locate a pair of sea kayaks to borrow in PNG, no easy task in itself. I had to practice my Eskimo rolls for kayaking, gather all the specific items required for these mutually exclusive disciplines, and really think ahead. It was challenging times indeed...

I often chuckle that I have created a monster and I have to feed it now. By thinking like the ultimate project manager, I am able to take apart that ominous unwieldy challenge and address each of its parts in the order that they deserve respectively. I am able to learn from a previous stage and to carry those learning into the next stage. This becomes an uplifting process which strengthens my hand over time.

How can sports help?

A well structured sports program will necessarily have athletes of different disciplines, their coaches, administrators and its sponsors. The general population could be described as the consumer of the value created by these additional stakeholders, and it is also the source which provides the raw talent. Just as a parent delivers her child to primary school in care of instructors, then leaves with hopes for that child to become a learned productive adult, the society submits its children to a sports program in care of coaches and its administrators.

We athletes use this term to represent anyone practicing a sports discipline whether competitively or not, derive more satisfaction and become progressively more successful as they learn to set goals. All athletes engage in sports for a reason; some would like to lose weight, some to have fun in the company of like minded individuals, some to become champions. Each one of these reasons is a dream yet to be realized, and those dreams do not become reality until the athletes set goals, then intermediate goals, commit to duration with intent, persevere past the tough sessions or injuries, and carry the weight of the season.

Coaches provide the guidance and the structured environment to channel the enthusiasm of their athletes. From well planned practice sessions laid out in annual, weekly and daily increments, the athletes learn discipline and self-control as a value. Coaches act as teachers, psychologists, mentors and role models. While athletes mature, simple details like timeliness at practice, avoiding heavy food three hours before a practice session or learning to manage their time to get enough sleep and study, become engrained in their psyche as building blocks toward achievable results.

The athletes who learn to love the sport, who look forward to the next practice session as a chance to improve themselves, and who understand to see a life with sports as a journey in it, remain engaged. Those who learn to measure their own success against their own performance will always have a well defined challenge which will motivate them. Learning to measure performance internally builds motivated individuals committed to the sport who may become a resource for the next generation of athletes. On the other hand, measuring success only by the outcome with an emphasis on results may create unnecessary stress in the athletes. Those who cannot produce results will leave the program. There are only so many medals to go around... Coaches are the crucial link here who can redirect an athlete's internal agony to show results toward performance.

Administrators are responsible for providing the facilities and the tangible resources to keep a sports program running. Finding capable coaches and providing timely

transportation for the athletes from the surrounding communities can be among their tasks. They can be the matchmakers to connect sponsors with programs, teams or specific athletes. These sponsors can vary from government institutions to corporations to private individuals. To paraphrase Joseph Campbell, administrators can become the invisible hands that open doors ahead of athletes who follow their own bliss.

I may be an idealist when I say this: the product of a sports program is not medals, but it is motivated individuals capable of taking action to accomplish goals of their own choosing. Such individuals groomed for success with life skills that sports can provide, supply the general population with productive members who have served their "rites of passage." This was the same source population which provided the raw talent, who are typically the real sponsors: the taxpayers who pay for the sports programs funded by the government. The corporate sponsors also try to impress the same population by associating themselves with the "success" of athletes in these same programs. Therefore, the entire operation of sports programs has to be a structured transformational education process, where raw talent in youth enters and motivated individuals exit back to society, ready to leave their mark.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a well coordinated team in creating successful sports programs. This may be an area for experts; however I have to reiterate the fact that the intention of all stakeholders has to be to create value for the society, the general source population in this case. Athletes, coaches and administrators all have dreams to manage and goals to achieve, to which I eluded earlier. And if our product is a transformed youth, then we can smile when we proudly declare that "it takes a village to raise a child."

Conclusion

A lifetime of involvement with sports has given me the confidence to consider geographical feats as a challenge. Climbing has been a constant pursuit in my life though lately I have been focusing on advancing a human powered circumnavigation of the world, and managing a nonprofit organization to provide educational benefits for the youth based on the same journey.

I was blessed with well meaning parents who encouraged me to try sports at an early age. In middle school, I had elder students from high school who taught me how to throw the discus. With his cross country, wrestling and track & field programs, my high school coach Al Rosner oversaw my transformation from an adolescent into a young man, chiseling me into a confident individual with a positive self-image. Skills that I gained from my high school years kept me actively engaged in sports throughout my university years. Time management was one of these skills, which to this day remains an important asset in my life.

Generations of youth will benefit from a well rounded sports program in learning life skills to reach their full potential. Each one among our youth deserves to gain a positive self image and the necessary self confidence to express a realistic dream and to pursue it.

Coaches in sports programs not only need to provide skills in specific sports disciplines, but also life skills which will have transformational effects on the athletes.

I provided examples in stories to the far reaching effects that a sports program can have in an individual's life. Our place in the world is the result of consecutive decisions that we have made at critical junctions in our lives. Joining a good sports program is one of these decisions which may provide the tools for a youth to flourish beyond our expectations.

Throughout my endeavors, I have looked for ways to create value for the society and to find ways to serve the common good. These were the values I had learned from my parents and my coach. As athletes we receive recognition and visibility which can be leveraged to benefit the society. One way to achieve this could be by sharing how we managed our respective journeys to success in our individual disciplines, which could prove instructive to children and adults alike.

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