



PETER PAL KISS ON RESILIENCE A WINNING MINDSET

Andy Stevenson: Peter you are only 17 years old and this is something we will come back to a few times but there will be teenagers listening to this thinking about what they would like to be in the future. You are already a European and world champion in para canoeing.

Peter Pal Kiss: It feels fantastic to be where I am right now and how much I have achieved and I thank everyone who has supported me through this journey because it wasn't just down to me to be here today. Yes, of course when I am competing that's my time to shine but, to have enough strength, I needed a lot of support and thankfully I had it.

AS: Do you still do the other things that other 17 years olds do? For example do you still follow education and some kind?

PPK: Yes of course I do, I am currently in secondary school in Year 10 called Kölcsey Ferenc high school. I study sports so I am surrounded by many other students who are enthusiastic about sport.

AS: What about other interests? How much time do you get to relax?

PPK: I don't have a lot of free time to be honest, I really need to organise my time if I would like to do something else. Yesterday the weather was great so I went outside to play basketball, everything to do with sports I like. I also enjoy team-based sports, even though kayaking isn't really team based. I also love drawing, so later on I am hoping to use my drawing skills perhaps in graphic design. I love listening to music. I also attend extra curricular activities and workshops.

AS: Tell us about guillain-barre-syndrome ?

PPK: Yes of course, I was 8 years old when it all happened. It was in 2012 at the end of winter. I had an extremely high temperature, around 40-42 celsius, it was a Friday and it lasted over the weekend, so roughly 2-3 days.

We called the doctor who initially thought it was flu and we did not take it very seriously. I received medication and was told to rest, but at this point we did not

think it was anything serious. We waited a week to see if my condition would improve, but instead of getting better I started to feel even worse. My legs started to go numb, so we went to see the doctor again who then realised there was something wrong and it wasn't just flu.

The doctor then referred me to Pecs Hospital, where they carried out multiple tests. It took another week for them to come up with a diagnosis and provide me with specific treatments. It was an extremely difficult time, not just for me but also my family. My mum was by my side in hospital at all times, while my brother and my father were at home taking care of the house, which was very difficult for them to cope with at the beginning. I was treated for 3 months and things started to look good. I felt better and the treatment seemed to work. But then I was referred to Zalaegerszeg for rehabilitation, as well as further medical treatments. However, I felt like I wasn't looked after very well in this place. I was on my own while I was doing my swimming rehabilitation exercises and my condition started to worsen again, ending up back in the wheelchair.

They sent me back to Pecs hospital, where the doctors were shocked by my return. They tried their absolute best to help me get stronger again but nothing seemed to work anymore. I was there for a further 4 months and, towards the end of the 4th month, the doctors said it seemed like things will not get better anymore. From then on they focused on helping me to cope and learn how to live with my disability. I'll be honest - it has been extremely hard - even though I was so young. I had pretty much lost all of my friends. I had a really good friend from nursery who I am still in touch with and he helped me a lot through those times.

AS: Did you lose your friends because you had to move away or was it because of your disability?

PPK: I was away on rehabilitation, which was very far away from my school and also I was very young. At that age I didn't know whether my friends would like to come and see me or not, I didn't go to school therefore we couldn't see each other at all. I didn't think it would be because of the illness. After the rehabilitation ended, quite a few of them got in touch with me to see how I was, but it didn't last very long.

AS: What memories do you have of that time? Any particular moment or feelings you remember?

PPK: It was awful. At the beginning I didn't understand - especially during the first week. I was happy because I didn't have to go to school. Looking back now, even

before anything happened, I was an extremely active child. I loved to play football - I even played in a football team. I loved running and even won competitions. So as you can see I loved being active and I struggled mentally and emotionally to process what happened. From one day being fit and active, to the next when suddenly I'm in a wheelchair. During my time at the rehabilitation centre, I received a lot of steroids injections and, as a consequence, I put on a lot of weight which also changed my physical appearance. I started to grow up and understand that nothing will ever be the same again. I had to become more mature, which wasn't easy at all.

AS: Are there times when you get angry at things you can't do?

PPK: When the rehabilitation finished - for about 2 years I would say - I was very down. I couldn't find myself, where I belonged, I was also angry. And then after meeting people who have the same sort of illness I managed to accept who I am now. Nowadays I don't really think of things that would make me angry, I'd rather focus on good things. The only thing I don't like is when other people look at me differently, but I try to ignore it.

AS: Do you sometimes think actually it was lucky that this happened to you when you were a child other than for example you being an adult?

PPK: Well, it really is a tough question, but I do believe it was better it happened then, yes of course. There isn't great any time regardless of whether you are young or an adult. I believe it was better that it happened then because I had much more time to create a new life for myself and adapt to the situation. With a young mindset I think it was much easier for me to get through those difficult times and cope with the situation than if it happened now. So yes, I can say I was lucky it happened then. I would rather say life had a different pathway planned for me. In some way my illness has helped to develop my personality rather than change it. I felt very lonely and didn't know anything about this condition. I did think a lot about WHY it is happening to me, why do I have to go through this? But now I understand why it all happened. It happened so I can show others, no matter what happens to you - what obstacles you face in life - it is possible to get through it all and still achieve great things.

AS: Do you think the illness and the disability has made you a stronger person?

PPK: Yes of course. Looking at the physical side - I don't think I would have started to do sports professionally unless this would have happened to me - at least definitely not kayaking ,which also helps to build great biceps! And also mentally,

accepting what happened and moving on, gaining confidence to go out in public etc. has definitely made me much stronger.

AS: Would you have a message for people who are listening and maybe they have gone through something dreadful themselves this year or recently not necessarily a disability but you know something in their life?

PPK: The message is: never give up. Maybe right now things aren't looking bright and promising and you think you are going through hell, but trust me things will always get better in time. Sometimes you have to fight to succeed to leave the darkness behind. Do not be afraid to ask for help because everyone needs help, whether it is from friends or family or even professional help because even I couldn't have succeeded without all the help I received from others.

AS: Where does your incredible resilience come from Peter? Is it from your parents, teachers, coaches or is it something just inside yourself?

PPK: I would say it comes from everyone because I received a lot of positive feedback and support which motivated me to never give up - which crossed my mind a few times. Sometimes I thought I would rather just go and play basketball with my friends or do something fun.

AS: Who were the main people who supported you Peter ?

PPK: First and foremost my family and my coach. My coach has been great, I am very thankful he found me and introduced me to canoeing and started my journey. At the beginning it was very hard to organise my travel to Budapest for training, but my family has been by my side at all times to help. Later on I received a lot of support from the club to send me to multiple training camps and also trained me to professional standards so I can start competing.

AS: How important was it for you that sport came along for you at that time?

PPK: Throughout my treatments I didn't really feel like myself any more but once I started swimming, things started to look more positive. It helped me build my confidence. I was swimming for a year and that's where I met Istvan (surname?), my coach who attended the swimming training sessions we had with other kids who had similar disabilities. He was looking for potential talents in canoeing. He thought I had a great physique and I swam well and, one day, he asked if I would like to try canoeing and of course I said 'why not?'. I actually thought it would be cool.

In 2014, every Monday I was training from 7pm till 9pm in the pool which was only 25 meters long, so I had to make quite a few turns. I did this for around 2 years and by the end of it I was questioning why on earth am I doing this? Is it even worth it? But of course it did because after 2 years we finally went out to open water, to the Danube river, which was a completely different feeling. I was extremely excited and I immediately fell in love with canoeing. From then on I never stopped. I have always loved sports but I felt like I finally found myself and who I am because of canoeing.

AS: Was that the moment when you were out in the open water when you thought yes this is who I am this is what I want to do and I will do my absolute best at it?

PPK: I started competing in 2017 because you cannot compete before you turn 14 years old. My first competition was when I was 14, which was actually very interesting because it was a marathon competition and I have not really done long distance canoeing before. I went there with a beginner's mindset. The start was great, for the first 300 meters I was actually leading, then I saw all the other competitors catching up with me (even the girls) so then I was a bit surprised thinking this might not work out.

It was a bit embarrassing to be the last to arrive at the finish line. Luckily this did not break my confidence and, if anything, it actually motivated me to train harder. In 2017 during autumn we started to train even harder and luckily I was able to train much more and I started to get better and better. In 2018 I attended a competition to qualify for the World Championship - I didn't expect to qualify whatsoever, my coach and I thought it would be a good experience and also get used to competing. My time wasn't actually that bad and even my coach thought I had a lot of potential and even I felt more confident. That's when we both decided we will focus on getting to the World Championships. I trained extremely hard in that season and I was delighted to attend the World Championship in 2019.

AS: Would you agree you are lucky?

PPK: Yes I am very happy that I found this sport - I almost feel like this sport was made for me. I love water now but it wasn't like this before. In fact I had a phobia of water because I almost drowned in water when I was little but luckily I managed to overcome my fears - and water and I are officially friends now .

AS: Can you perhaps describe exactly how you were getting better and how you were mentally focusing on getting better and not letting these setbacks stop you?

With all honesty I still haven't succeeded. It's an ongoing process. I am still nervous each time I am at the start of a competition - but there is nothing wrong with this feeling. At the beginning of my kayaking journey I fell in love with the kayaking community and the spirit of competitions. I have my role models I look up to who inspire and motivate me, and I am very grateful and thankful for their support. When I started competing I was a bit afraid - I guess because I was still very young - a little 14-year-old competing against adults - so I wasn't entirely sure whether I belonged here. I had to learn a lot and understand that hard work and training will pay off eventually.

I had a goal in my head and nothing could stop me. I kept swimming a lot, alongside kayaking, which was very important to loosen up muscles to make sure I wasn't too stiff. I struggled a little with swimming because the chlorine in the water makes me sneeze a lot and blocks my nose but even these setbacks could not put me off from training. I also go to the gym frequently, which I also didn't like first. I felt embarrassed to see other people lifting 100kg and I am playing with light weights but I understood the importance of training so I just carried on.

AS: You won the world title in 2019 in Hungary and you were named Allianz athlete of the month as well that must have been a dream come true for you. Tell us about that time in your life when you became world champion in Hungary?

PPK: It is a fantastic feeling. I never felt this feeling ever before. The fact that I could participate in the World Championship in my own country was a great feeling and completely changed my life. I have been asked to attend interviews - which I really enjoyed, people started to know my name and people were interested in getting to know me. They even started to ask for pictures of me. I felt extremely happy, all the supporters who attended and cheered for me were fantastic. Literally everything changed. I felt like people were proud to know me and I am truly filled with happiness.

AS: And with the Tokyo Paralympics - how are you 'stopping all this success getting into your head'?

PPK: Things are different now because of Coronavirus because up until now we had a plan with my coach and the team behind me as to how I will need to train alongside attending school. We even told my teachers that my main goal is to the

Tokyo Paralympics. During the summer I kind of felt like I am getting further and further away from the Paralympics and I almost lost my motivation. But luckily, I did have a few competitions lined up which brought positivity and motivation back into my life. I didn't miss out on any training and I know what my goal is and I am getting closer and closer to achieving it. Even though the Paralympics are still far away, I can already feel the buzz it's giving me.

AS: How much will all the people who have supported you along the way be on your mind? Will you be wanting to win a gold medal almost more for those people, your parents and the coaches than yourself?

PPK: To be honest for both. Of course mainly for myself because I love doing what I do and it would be phenomenal if I could succeed, but on the other hand it would also be dedicated to my coaches and also the whole country.

AS: And finally Peter I've read that if you do get the gold medal in Tokyo then they are going to build a statue of you in your village In Hungary? Is that right?

PPK: Yes there was some gossip about it. The Paralympics isn't so far away anymore so I guess we will see if that actually happens. I am interested to see it myself.

AS: Do you have any preferences as to what the statue would look like? Preferably you would be in your canoe?

PPK: Absolutely, it would have to be in my canoe because that is who I truly am and that's what would win the gold medal.