

# WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



## Mental Training for Peak Performance

**Jen Fisher (Jen):** Hey this is Jen. Before we get started with today's show, I have a quick ask of you. We are two seasons into our WorkWell podcast series, and I want to hear from you. If the show has helped you in any way, please take a couple of minutes to rate and review the show. Let us know what you think. Let us know what's helped you. Let us know what you want more of or what you want less of, but just take a couple of minutes to do that. It would mean a ton to me and it will help us get better and better in the future. I really do want to hear from you.

Every two years as the Olympics draw near, our excitement for sports and physical wellness is at an all-time high. And though many of us will never compete at the Olympic level, there is a lot we can learn from these incredible athletes. This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I am Jen Fisher, Chief Well-being Officer for Deloitte and I am so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being.

**Chris Hammer (Chris):** *I guess that's kind of my apprehension about joining parasports to begin with because I never considered myself to have a disability because I was always expected to do anything that anyone else could do. But you have to realize, well this is the reality of the situation. I have one hand and some things that other people can do, it's more difficult for me, but the vast majority of people who are successful are successful because they are relentless in their pursuit of that success.*

**Jen:** I am here with Chris Hammer, a five-time NCAA All-American distance runner who earned a gold medal in the 1500 at the 2011 Para Pan-American Games and finished top 10 in the 1500 and marathon in the 2012 London Paralympic Games. Following the 2012 Games, Chris turned his sights toward the triathlon. He won a bronze medal in the 2014 and 2017 World Championships and he earned a spot on the National Team for the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio, where he finished in fourth place.

**Chris:** I am from Michigan, so ice hockey is popular. I played hockey growing up as probably middle school or so at the time and one of my friends was more into running, I guess than I was, and I went out for middle school track with him. It quickly kind of became apparent that any future career I would have in athletics was not going to be ice hockey, it would probably more be running, and so I continued to run in high school, and I graduated high school in 2004. I think I did my first triathlon in 2013. I was competing in college. It was at an indoor track invitational in Seattle, Washington, and I just had a decent 5K. I think I finished second in the heat I was in. It was a good race for me, and I was actually

approached by the Paralympics track coach for the United States and I blew it off at the time. I had no idea what the Paralympics was. I am competing at this high level in college and I don't even know what the Paralympics are, and so I kind of just blew off the opportunity when it came up that first time around. Speaking with friends, teammates, coaches who knew a bit, who, like "Hey, this is a really cool opportunity for you to represent your country, travel internationally, continue to compete post-collegiately." So, that's kind of when I started to look into it a bit more, but yeah it wasn't like something I actively pursued. It's kind of funny. Now that's such a big part of my life and I avoided it at first.

**Jen:** That's a really fascinating story, really interesting. I am a big believer in micro habits or micro behaviors. We talk about that a lot when it comes to personal well-being. Obviously, as a professional athlete such as yourself, you do a lot of training in your sport, a lot of training of your physical body but can you talk about some potentially other micro habits, small things that you do throughout your day to keep you centered, to keep you grounded, especially at times of competition.

**Chris:** Yeah, that's a good question. I guess the biggest thing I really try to do is just to focus on the here and now and focus on the things that I can control. It does me no good to just worry about Tokyo, that's still not until August. In order to get there and to do the best that I can do there, there are millions and millions of things that have to happen like before then. So, I really just try to focus on what I can in the current moment and I think if I were that kind of project into the future too much, I would drive myself crazy because there is so much that you can't control, there is so much that has to get done, and that would just be doing a disservice to where I am at and what I am trying to do.

**Jen:** Are there any specific habits that you have to help you stay focused in the here and now? Mindfulness is a big area I think in sports and also in the corporate world, is that something that you practice or that you encourage others to practice?

**Chris:** It definitely is. Within the USOC, the sport psychs who work within that, that's something that they really are pushing. I got my PhD in sports psychology that I studied Positive Psychology and that was a big component of it as well. I don't formally practice as much as I should or as I tell my own student athletes to do when I coach, but it is something I try to do because what it really does is it gives you the opportunity to respond rather than just to react and so that's so valuable because things can go wrong and your reaction might not be the best thing that you can do in that moment or your natural reaction and that's happened to me in a race before where it was the World Championship and I dropped my chain. Like so on your bike, you kind of catch yourself in a bad gear, your chain can fall off, and it's like, you are in a race, you are in a World Championship and that's a horrible thing to happen, but you could react and just freak out or you can take a split second and calmly respond by putting your chain back on your bike and continuing on with your race. It happened to me, it's not ideal.

**Jen:** What was the outcome of that race?

**Chris:** I finished in third, so on the podium at the World Championships.

**Jen:** That is a pretty big endorsement of mindfulness and meditation and being able to be in the moment to respond versus react.

**Chris:** Yeah definitely.

**Jen:** When you are preparing for an actual competition or performance, do you have any specific rituals that you do? I know we hear about a lot of athletes that have pre-performance rituals that they do. I would love to hear about any of yours.

**Chris:** Honestly, I don't have any. It's okay to have like the pre-race routines and it could be beneficial depending on where you are at mentally, maybe that's something that can help you to relax or concentrate but you don't want to be too reliant on those because then if something goes wrong, then you are out of whack or you feel like you are not in your best position to compete. So, I really try to do away with those and just be able to function at my highest level no matter what the circumstances. I remember in London in 2012, it was such a surreal experience because you are staging below the Olympic Stadium. They just usher you from one place to another and there is no way that any routine I had like going into it I would have been able to simulate it. So yeah, I guess for me personally, I like to just be able to roll with the punches.

**Jen:** Show up and take in whatever it is to take in.

**Chris:** Yeah.

**Jen:** You mentioned your background in sports psychology and we have talked about physical training, I guess what I am trying to get at is the importance of mental training when it comes to sport or other things that we are passionate about. Yes, we can train our bodies physically, but I have a belief that our minds are just as powerful if not more powerful when we show up for a big event or a race in your case. So, how has your background in sports psychology, do you think, how has that helped you and how do you coach others when it comes to that?

**Chris:** I mean here is the thing, especially in a sport. The sport is still predominantly physical, you can't put a percentage on it but maybe it is 95% physical or 99% physical and only 1% mental, but it's that 1% mental that controls the 99% that's physical. So that's how I look at it. Yeah, it is a physical sport, you have to train the physical, but if you don't have that mental component down, it could just ruin everything for you. That's, from my personal experience and education, something I do emphasize that I need to take that seriously and again it's something when life is busy, I always prioritize like the swim, bike, and run and maybe not so much the formal sports psychology things that I could do to benefit myself, but it is something that has always, if not at the forefront of my mind, it is not too far behind.

**Jen:** And what are some things that people can do to help train that mental side?

**Chris:** There's so many things, I mean the one thing I find really...that works really well is imagery. Just like seeing yourself do something

**Jen:** So, visualizing...thing

**Chris:** Yeah visualization is...that may be the more common term, but I like imagery because visualization just implies, you're seeing it but like imagery you want it to be like an experience. So, what does it feel like, what does it smell like? Like incorporate as many senses as you can, make it as real of an experience as you can.

**Jen:** I like that, that's a really good tip. What else you got?

**Chris:** I think the ability to relax when it's appropriate is...like any coach will say their athletes, just relax out there, like assuming that that's a skill that everyone has, but really like...people don't, they have to learn how to relax and so doing relaxation exercises, whether it is meditation or just like breath awareness, or there's other techniques that you can do, but just learning how to relax. For some people maybe relaxation is not a problem, maybe they need to like pump themselves up. So, I guess it's more of being able to regulate the amount of...like your arousal, so you can get to that zone of optimal functioning and a big part of that is knowing what your zone of optimal functioning is. Some people respond well when there's a ton of pressure on them, and some people you don't want to feel that pressure. So, kind of having that self-awareness, like to know this is where I perform best and then having the tools to get you into that zone.

**Jen:** I completely agree with that. Thinking about the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games for athletes that kind of falls four years apart, what do you do in the in between time to keep yourself physically and mentally healthy?

**Chris:** It is different because you're looking at it as a quadrennium, so maybe for triathlon you have three disciplines between swim, bike, and run, maybe you're going to sacrifice some components of your triathlon in a certain year to improve others and realizing I might not see the immediate results, but in the big picture it's going to help me achieve what I want to achieve. So that's what I guess from the periodization standpoint, you really break it apart that way, knowing that you have four years to put it all together. Mentally, I think you do want to step back and maybe just enjoy some other parts of life a little bit more, and not be wholly consumed by this one thing. So, I don't know if I'm going on past Tokyo, but I do know 2021 is going to be a little bit of a step back from triathlon. I have a 2-year-old and 5-year-old. I have a job.

**Jen:** It is a lot.

**Chris:** Yeah and not that I neglect any of those other responsibilities, but it would be good to kind of, you know, like just spread out my time more and just maybe put triathlon on the backburner a little bit.

**Jen:** But I think that's such a powerful message for anyone in life, whether they are a professional athlete or not, that four years between games is fascinating to me and I think about it in terms of my professional career. We all live in this go, go, go society and we don't really take the time to step back and number one, celebrate our successes. We just keep moving on. And number two we don't look at it as...quite often we don't look at it as the long game. And I love what you said about, you know, I might focus on swimming or I might focus on biking and I won't see those results immediately, but in the in the long-term they will make me better, and I think that's just such a really powerful message, so thank you for sharing that.

**Chris:** Yeah, having perspective is one of those things that is easier said than done. And that is why it is so beneficial to have a coach or someone who can hold you accountable in some ways but also hold you back in other ways. Because I know, I am a coach to athletes and they always want to just go, go, go. Like, one of my athletes in particular, she's always going 100 mph, like her foot all the way down on the gas pedal. It is just like, you know, I'm trying to rein her in a little bit. Like you don't always need to be pushing it that hard.

**Jen:** Do you worry about burnout with the athletes that you coach, or do you see that?

**Chris:** It is a fine line you have to...yeah, because you do need to push it but that's why you need a coach. Because I can tell my own athletes "Hey, you got to bring it back a little bit," but then here I am doing the same exact thing as they do, so then my coach has to...

**Jen:** I guess that's the human condition, right. The message is we all need some sort of coach in our life.

**Chris:** Yeah exactly, just someone who can kind of...you can bounce ideas off of or someone who...I think that's so beneficial.

**Jen:** Alright, so you talked about your two children, a two year old and a five year old, so talk to me a little bit about how you integrate family life with training and with the job, because I think that's something that many of our listeners are, you know, we all struggle with that regardless of what our career or life looks like. So, can you tell me how you make that happen in your own life?

**Chris:** Family is my number one priority. Like, my girls, my wife, that always has to come number one, and there's trips I don't take, training trips, races I don't take, because it would be too much. So, I finished fourth at Rio at the Paralympic Games in triathlon.

**Jen:** Congratulations.

**Chris:** Thanks. It is tough because that is the first place off of the podium, and I forget who asked this, but the question was like, "Well, if you weren't pursuing a PhD program, if you weren't married with a kid, how do you think that would have changed things?" And I said, well, maybe I would have finished on the podium, but it doesn't mean that I would never trade my life for that in a million years. So, having that perspective about what really matters is what really keeps me going and knowing that a triathlon is not who I am, it's a big part of who I am, but it doesn't define me. So, having that perspective takes the pressure off. Also, I have nothing to lose here, I love being a triathlete, but at the end of the day it doesn't define me. It's my kids, my family.

**Jen:** Do you involve your girls in your training at all? Do you think they're going to follow in your footsteps? I know 2 and 5, so probably too early to tell.

**Chris:** I will never force them to, but I think that triathlon and running is a cool thing that you can share with your family. You can go for runs and bike rides and learning to swim is a great skill. Right now, they definitely know what triathlon is. They are hanging around my team a lot, my collegiate triathlon team. So, they have some pretty cool role models there of young, strong women who are pursuing the sport at a high level. But I don't know, I'd like to see them do it, but no pressure.

**Jen:** So, how has being a coach help shape you? How has it changed you, as an athlete yourself? Give me one or two things that you've actually learned from the students that you coach.

**Chris:** That is a good question. It shapes me for one because I'm learning more. I'm putting myself in that position to learn more about, you know, the science behind training. I know

from all my years of training I kind of have a good idea of the art of training. How things fit together, but now I'm learning more about the science as to why they fit together so well. So that's been beneficial. What my team has taught me, it is a good question, I feel like I should come up with a good answer and hope they won't be offended. It has just been refreshing because a lot of my team, they did not come from a triathlon background, and for them to, you know, a lot of them are also international or definitely not from West Virginia where my college is, so for them to take that big leap and to try a new sport, go to a new place, go to college, start a team that is just now two years old. We built it from the ground up starting last year. That takes a lot of courage and so I thought that motivates me as well, that these young student athletes are willing to take that step and to try new things and push themselves to learn, that really refreshes kind of...

**Jen:** Inspiring, so it keeps you inspired, motivated. That is awesome. So, do you have a proudest moment in your own professional career?

**Chris:** I don't. I'm not really results driven. I really want to be on the podium at Tokyo. I think that would be incredible, but it's just learning the sport is what really...

**Jen:** So, it is the journey for you, not the destination.

**Chris:** Yeah, I almost quit before or like when I just got started in 2013, when I contacted the Team USA paratriathlon team manager and said, "Hey, I'm interested in coming out for a triathlon or like trying out for the Team USA, here's my background as a runner. No background as a swimmer or cyclist. So, they flew me out to the Chula Vista Olympic training center at the time and one of the things we did was we had to swim in one of the bays, you know attached to the ocean. And obviously I could run, and I knew how to ride a bike, so that was a skill I could learn, but it was the swimming that was really going to get me. So, swimming in a pool was, you know, I was slow, but now swimming in an ocean that was something else, so you wear a wet suit if the water is cold enough, which even in Southern California it was at the time. So, you wear wet suit, which is cool because it makes you look like a superhero. It is tight, black, rubbery material, but it's also really tight. And so, you...maybe I was 50 yards offshore and it was just so constricting around my neck and I never had a panic attack before, and I've never had one since, but I'm like in that moment I was just, you know, it was really rough. And so, I was thinking, like triathlon is just not for me, like if I get back to the shore, which I probably won't, because there's probably sharks in this water.

**Jen:** So you went there.

**Chris:** If I get back, I am done, I quit triathlon and this is just too much for me, like I can run, I can bike, but I cannot learn the swimming thing especially in open water. But then I took a moment to collect myself and realize that I have never quit anything before in my life. I'm not going to start now, and I didn't know what I would become as a triathlete, but I knew I wasn't going to quit. That is the first obstacle I faced. And so, going back to your question I think that's what I'm really proud of is that I just stuck with it and I continued to learn and I continued to get better. And I'm not young. I'm one of the oldest triathletes in my classification, and not just by a few years by a lot of years. It is a young man's sport, apparently. But I'm still making progress, I'm still getting decent results, and I'm proud that I never gave up and I keep working at it.

**Jen:** And are you used to the wet suit now?

**Chris:** Yes, yes. But Tokyo will not be a wet suit swim, so nothing to worry there.

**Jen:** So, then what is your proudest moment as a coach?

**Chris:** Again, the outcomes we experience as a team were incredible. Winning a regional championship, finishing second at the national championship, having the individual national champion were all incredible, but you don't do it for the outcome. So, I'm just proud of how the team comes together from all different backgrounds. We have people from Spain, from Austria, from Canada, someone from India, from all over the US to form this team in West Virginia and it is just coming together to work toward the common goal and to form a family and to be such good role models for my children. I'm just proud that this team exists and that they work together to do this.

**Jen:** That is awesome, again another really powerful message. So, I have one final question and it might be the most important of the entire podcast. According to the official Team USA website, your name is on the wall of fame in a bar in Michigan for eating 12 chili dogs in one sitting. Do you want to share the story with us, Chris?

**Chris:** So, I like to eat. That is one thing, you know, the nutritionist or dietitians with the USOC they've never really been able to change my affinity for food and junk food, though I think I do better now. But that was in college, a group of my teammates we went out to I think only a few of us tried this task and I was successful.

**Jen:** And I won't ask about the aftermath.

**Chris:** I am definitely not like a food eating champion or...

**Jen:** That is not your next career, we're not going to see you go and do the hot dog eating contest.

**Chris:** No, I can't compete there. I know my wife makes fun of me because whenever there's a challenge or something just a problem that I need to fix or like I just am relentless in my pursuit of figuring it out whether it's like there's something around the house that needs to be fixed or a question that I'm trying to figure out and it's just, in a way I think it annoys her because it's like you know just drop it, come back to it, like we have to go or something like that, but it's just kind of my mindset. I am singularly determined to whatever is in front of me, to achieve excellence or to be successful and it's hard for me to let that go.

**Jen:** So, do you think there is downside to that?

**Chris:** I mean there is probably a downside...

**Jen:** Because you said your coach kind of has to tell you...how to help you modulate, so if you didn't have that coach potentially there'd be a bigger downside...

**Chris:** So one thing that happened was when I was in middle school, my friend who got me to run track, he was more talented and I think the coach was expecting more of him and I

remember, because he told me this story, that the coach told him "Hammer, you're more talented than him, but he runs faster than you because he's had to work harder to accomplish things his whole life, having one hand." And that's something I never really thought about before, but I guess it was just something I've dealt with my whole life and so maybe I do work harder to do the things that other people might take for granted. I'm never offended when people bring it up, like kids ask questions all the time and like I realize, I guess that was kind of my apprehension about joining parasports to begin with, because I never considered myself to have a disability because I was always expected to do anything that anyone else could do. You know you have to realize like well this is the reality of the situation, like I have one hand and some things that other people can do are more difficult for me. Yeah, there's nothing to be offended by just do what you can do. Just be the best that I can be. I guess it's not until I got older and you think about things more, you become more reflective I guess, that I started putting the pieces together. Just how like I was raised, my favorite book growing up or at least the book I read the most was *The Little engine that could*. And on my wall, there's a poster that says accept the challenges that you may feel the exhilaration of victory, and it's like I had other siblings, I don't think they were ever groomed in the same way to be like "Hey, like you can do anything you set your mind to." So, I think that's just kind of how I was raised, and I credit my parents for instilling that in me. I'm sure everyone who is successful in what they do, they are determined and there's a few people who are so talented, but that is such the minority. The vast majority of people who are successful are successful because they are relentless in their pursuit of that success.

**Jen:** I'm so glad Chris could be here today. Thank you to our producers and our listeners, you can find the WorkWell podcast series on Deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword WorkWell, all one word, to hear more. And if you like the show, don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you'd like to hear on the workwell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share please reach out to me on LinkedIn, my profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on Twitter @Jenfish23. We're always open to your recommendations and feedback and of course if you like what you hear please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.

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