

Novie (00:03)

You're tuning in to season seven of Inclusion Revolution Radio, sponsored by Toyota. I'm your host, Novie Craven. I'm excited to welcome you to this season. If you're one of our longtime listeners, you may notice something different. For season seven, we'll be bringing all the action to you from the studios of Podville Media, our Podcast Production Host. A leading podcast production studio in Washington, D.C., Podville Media has partnered with Inclusion Revolution Radio to enhance the mission of inclusion on air.

Today we are honored to be joined by Tyrone Pillay, a former Paralympian who represented South Africa in shot put, winning a bronze medal at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games. But Tyrone's impact goes far beyond his achievements in competition. He's a passionate advocate for inclusion in sports and support of Special Olympics and now works with Toyota to drive accessibility and opportunities for athletes of all abilities. Tyrone, welcome to Inclusion Revolution Radio.

We're excited to have you here. Tyrone, can you begin by telling us about your journey to competing in the Paralympics?

Tyrone (01:10)

Wow. So, my journey started as a Paralympian in 2009. I watched the Beijing Paralympic Games, and I was at a really different phase in my life where I wasn't sure which way to go because I was playing an able-bodied sport. And unfortunately, I couldn't crack into the able-bodied setup because of my disability. I mean, I was really talented at the sport that I played, but they never wanted to select me any further because of my disability. And then I watched the Beijing Paralympics, and I was completely blown away with what I saw.

I saw athletes in wheelchairs, athletes with arms missing, feet missing. And I said, wow, this is something maybe I can do. And I'm completely new to parasport. I've never done it before. I mean, I've only played able-bodied sports. So that was completely new. And that's how I started. I sent an email and I'm like, can I try this out? And they were like, yeah, sure. And they set up an interview for me to go across to meet this guy who runs all the sport in the area.

And then he gives me options and he's like, wheelchair basketball and I said, wait hold on, I've never been a wheelchair in my life, so imagine me playing wheelchair basketball; I'll probably jump out and try to dunk people.

Novie (02:15)

Yeah, like Michael Jordan, like Michael Jordan, yeah. Or Kobe Bryant.

Tyrone (02:21)

Yeah. Then, the other option was to play golf. And then I said to him, the only handicap I have is my left leg. So that's not going to work either. So, I said, no. And then obviously they said to me, why don't you try athletics? And then there were different options, there was shot put, discus, javelin. I'm not exactly the world's smallest guy. So, I figured, maybe this is something, something I could do. And I was obsessed with strength and power.

So figured I could combine that. So that's how I started off. I was basically watching the Beijing Paralympic Games and then believing that I can actually one day compete for my country because that's the ultimate honor for any athlete is to be able to compete for your country.

Novie (02:56)

Can you explain to the listeners a little bit about how to play shot put. So, can you explain? Okay.

Tyrone (03:05)

Yeah. So, firstly, the shot put is a big metal ball. It literally sits around about here when you throw it. It weighs six kilograms. In pounds, my math is not that good. I think it's around like 12 to 13 pounds, somewhere around there. So, it's quite heavy. And then we throw it across the field in a sector for as far as you can possibly throw. So, my current best is 13 meters 91. That's the African and South African record that I hold. So that's the furthest, but I'm hoping to go further in the years to come.

Novie (03:40)

Throughout your career, you've seen first-hand the power of sports to break down barriers. How is Special Olympics using sports to change the lives of people with intellectual disabilities?

Tyrone (03:50)

I think, you know, when you see the Special Olympics and I've been privileged enough, I've been to the Berlin World Games as well as now to Turin, the power that the Special Olympics has is that it teaches you to be proud of who you are and be given an opportunity to showcase who you are. And then these are things that I've taken from it in the time that I've been there. And I believe sport has such a huge role to play in giving you confidence and belief. Also, when you see the support that you get out of it, it's amazing.

I mean, I was there watching snowshoeing. I don't even know what snow is because in South Africa we don't have snow. So, I was like, wow, look at this. at the end of it, I wanted to try it.

Novie (04:31)

Did they let you do it?

Tyrone (04:35)

Unfortunately, I was on a really tight schedule, so I didn't have time to try it, but maybe next time I will. It was so amazing to see it. And that's the inspiration that it served. You know, when I looked at it, I looked at amazing athletes and I'm one of those people, I hate distinguishing between Olympians, Paralympians, Special Olympians, we're all athletes. And when I look at that, I say, wow, these are amazing athletes. And what's my excuse? I can do this as well. So, you know, it's amazing power that it gives to you. And I think the sport shows the athletes that you are inspiring people all the way. And that for me is just absolutely powerful.

Novie (05:07)

What is one thing about Paralympians or Special Olympics athletes that you wish more people understood?

Tyrone (05:14)

Well, the first thing is we're athletes. I think that's, that's the number one thing. You know, I get quite annoyed when people always want to say, how do you see yourself? We're athletes. And, and, and that for me, you start with that and then we build from there. But the biggest thing is we want to be treated with respect, just like everyone else. We want to be given a fair opportunity. We want to be in there as well. You know, I came from a place where I was doing able-bodied sport and then I went into parasport and I didn't know what this world was ever going to be.

And to be honest with you, I get more respect from the Paralympics than I do if I was competing in the Olympics, in my opinion. And I just feel it's something where you need to have respect for the people that are competing and all athletes, that's all they ever want.

Novie (05:57)

Like, yeah, I mean, exactly. You hit it right on the nail. You represented Toyota as an ambassador at the Special Olympics World Games in Turin. What were your favorite moments from the Games? I think you said the snowshoeing, right?

Tyrone (06:11)

Well, it was amazing to see it, but I had so many. Toyota even set up an athlete recovery lounge. So, we had a lot of athletes that were in there. And the funniest part was everybody thought I was a physio when they saw me because of this knowledge I have, you know, for the body. So, it was like always having people coming in and asking me questions about their body and how to stretch and how to do this. And I'm like, I'm not a physio.

I was like, really, it was, it was really funny. That was really one thing I enjoyed that people took to me really, really well. But one of the nicest things was the Irish team called me into their changing room and asked me to give the team a pep talk before they went out to play floorball. And I love that they, they included me in this. I went in, I gave a pep talk to the team and they ended up winning a bronze medal and the guy came back in, and they were so excited that they came to hug me, and they were like, thank you so much for all that you did to inspire us and motivate us.

It was quite amazing. I felt that was another great moment. There's so many. I think if I carry on, I'm going to be in this call for two hours.

Novie (07:11)

We can go all night; we can go all day.

Tyrone (07:15)

I think there's so much power in it. I mean, I tried playing floorball as well. I was lucky enough to get the opportunity to play and I didn't realize how hard it was. Oh my God. I still remember going into the goal without any cover, any mask or any gloves or anything. And I'm like, don't worry. I'll stop this thing. These hands are huge. This ball comes in, I didn't even see it. By the time I picked my hand up, the ball was already in the net. And I'm like, okay, on second thought, this is not a good idea.

There were many things, and for me it will always be an amazing experience. I think it's something that people need to experience. The World Games is so powerful. It makes you put so many things into perspective as well.

Novie (07:57)

Like Opening Ceremony is pretty amazing because you get to, I actually competed in the USA Games in Seattle and Opening Ceremonies were pretty cool because they had their band play, well, introducing like us and it was pretty cool because I was just dancing and everybody in the crowd was just excited because if you know me, I love to dance. And they were like, Novie, you gotta stop dancing. You gotta walk straight. You gotta walk to your seat. You can't stop there.

But it was pretty cool because I was able to, you know, get out and dance with one of the performers that performed at the Opening Ceremony. Just the interaction was just amazing because I've met a lot of good friends from there and it was just amazing. Of course I was, I was going up there to, you know, hopefully get medals. So, I got a gold medal, a bronze medal and a ribbon.

Tyrone (08:53)

But I always say this to people, the Opening Ceremony of any Games is the starting point for your championship. When you go out there, that energy boost of the Opening Ceremony takes you into your competition. I mean, I'll share some pictures with you at a later stage of me jumping in Rio, high-fiving a guy that's like two meters high in the air. And I'm like high-fiving him because of the excitement of the Opening Ceremony. I mean, there was like 70,000 people in the stands. The excitement just overcomes and it's just so powerful that it helps you to get into your competition.

Novie (09:24)

So, you know, it's like you get to meet other athletes, but also, you know, have as much fun you want.

Tyrone (09:32)

It's the hype, it's everything. exactly. And that's why like the dancing is not a bad thing. It's just, it just getting you going ready for, for the main event.

Novie (09:40)

In addition to your role as an ambassador for Toyota, you are a member of the Toyota Europe workforce. Can you tell me a bit about your role?

Tyrone (09:49)

So obviously I've always worked for Toyota. Toyota is the only company I've ever worked for. I've been with them for 20 years. I recently moved, it's like around about three years now that I moved to Toyota Europe, where I was brought in for the Olympics and Paralympics, because you know, we were the sponsors for the Paris Games. And after the Games, I moved into a new role, which is sports and athlete support. So, we basically taking care of events such as Special Olympics events as well as other Paralympic events and also, we have a whole lot of athletes that we sponsor, so taking care of them as well and all their requirements and needs. So, it's quite a big role now compared to before because we've there's a small team, but we have a lot more work that we need to take care of within Europe.

Novie (10:32)

Can you share how Toyota helped you transition from an athlete into a corporate role off the playing field?

Tyrone (10:39)

For me, that's a bit of a difficult one because I was always working for Toyota even before I became an athlete. So, the transition wasn't so much there, but the support that Toyota gave me was great. You know, I work long hours. I used to work sometimes like eight, nine hours a day, then go and train and then come back towards the latter part leading into Tokyo. Toyota was really amazing in allowing me to actually train more. So it was, it was really good from that. And then once I stopped after Tokyo, I went back into my, my role in the company working in IT.

So, I was working in an IT role for probably around about three years before I left to join Toyota Motor Europe. But the transition was easy for me because I was always working for them. So, it wasn't a difficult transition, unlike some athletes who've never worked and then tried a transition. So, for me, it was actually not that difficult.

Novie (11:28)

We both have dual responsibilities as athletes and employees of respective organizations. You're with Toyota and I'm with Special Olympics. How do you manage balancing both commitments?

Tyrone (11:40)

Wow. It's not easy. It's not easy. I have so many things on the go that I do as well. So, to train, I used to put in six hours a day to my training. At the moment, I've reduced that quite a bit because of the time, but yeah, work is priority. It pays the bills. Unfortunately, I mean, I don't know how it is for you, but on the Paralympic side, it doesn't bring you a lot of money. So, it's not that you're making a lot out of the sport. So, you have to work. You have to have something that pays the bills.

So, Toyota, in my case, I'm very lucky to have them because they completely support me and do everything that they can to help me get to where I want to be. So, from an employee point of view, it's the full day, eight-hour day that I normally pull, nine-hour depending. And then it's just training. So, it's just pure training immediately after six days a week, six hours a day is what I used to do. Now I've reduced it slightly.

And yeah, I compete quite a lot. In the year, sometimes I'm competing from around about March all the way through to August. It's a long time that I'm competing and then there's not much downtime because as soon as the competitions end, it's preparing for the next season. So, I've been doing this for 15 years now. So, it's a long time that I've been doing it this way. And it excites me as well, because I can't imagine

just being an athlete or just an employee. I think I'd probably get bored out of my mind. So, I think this, this keeps me going, keeps me active.

Also, it allows me to have a fun, you like you have a bad day at work, you can take it out on the shot put, you know, that kind of thing. So, the shot put has to be the brunt of my anger. So, it's really good. I think I enjoy that part of it and it gives me a nice balance as well.

Novie (13:16)

Definitely being an athlete and employee, for me, it is definitely amazing because I can do both, you know. Work comes first, then the sports come after that, but definitely being able to juggle that is amazing because, you know, sometimes if I need help along the way, there's help always. And definitely being able to be a part of Special Olympics International is truly amazing.

Tyrone (13:39)

And also, I think you showcase what is possible. And there's so many others that look up to you because of that. And that's how I feel. You know, when you look around you, it's so easy to make excuses in the world, but there's very few people that actually go out and make things happen. So, you are an example of that. So well done to you on that. Thank you.

Novie (13:57)

Thank you so much. I mean, I'm ecstatic with that. Definitely. Thank you so much for those kind words.

Tyrone (14:02)

You're welcome.

Novie (14:03)

Toyota has been an important partner of Special Olympics movement. Can you share the impact this partnership has had?

Tyrone (14:09)

Yeah, so I think the partnership is massive. I think what we try to do as well, I mean, as a company, Toyota stands for a lot. And I mean, if you looked at the past, even with the Paralympic side of it as well, we always want to make a difference. We always want to impact the world in a better way. So, you know, I think there's so much we have done and there's so much more we can do as well. And I think as a company, Toyota is always striving to make lives of others better.

You know, we're always trying to do things and through sport, it's massive because Toyota has a huge sport culture. Most people don't really know that. I mean, Toyota has a huge culture in Japan. So, for us, sport is an important beacon or avenue for us. So, I think it's really great that Toyota wants to do the things that they do. Also, they're so passionate about it. I think that's the big thing. You need to have passion. Everything you do in life, if there's no passion, there's no point in doing it. And there's so much of passion in it. mean, just from, if you look at what happened at the World Games now in Turin to do all these athletes recovery lounges was not easy to have that in place to allow that over and above. I mean, just the sponsorship, just to make sure the athletes are getting everything that they could possibly get so that they can go out there and perform at their best. That just shows you the level of what Toyota wants to do.

Novie (15:22)

I saw some pictures of the athletes with their feet in that little, with the, what is that?

Tyrone (15:28)

The compression pants, the one where the legs are in the pants, and it swells up?

Novie (15:32)

Yes, yes. Have you ever been in one those?

Tyrone (15:34)

I'm the reason why they have these things, because I've been using this for a long time. I've been having them for, I think probably around about six, seven years now. And I swear by them, they actually work really well for me. At first, I was skeptical; I won't lie. Until I started using them, and because of the amount I trained, so the volume of training, I needed something that will help me to recover really well. Before this, I used to do something called ice bathing where I would jump into ice to like here.

Temperatures were like around about eight degrees and that was to try and help me to recover. So now, I'm living in a very cold country. So figured it's not the wisest thing to do that. I'll be permanently sick. So, I looked at alternative recovery methods. So, these are the ones that I tried and, they work really, really well, especially after heavy training. And I mean, I have a lot of testimonies from, from the athletes that tried them out at the Games, and they said the same thing. It was really amazing. They were blown away by the products.

So yeah, it's simply amazing. If you haven't tried it, I suggest you start trying one.

Novie (16:37)

How can companies follow the leadership of Toyota to create more opportunities for athletes with disabilities?

Tyrone (16:44)

Wow. You know, that's a tough question because I've been fighting this for a long time. And I think they need to come to some sort of balance. I think it's something that they need to realize is the right thing to do. I mean, if I take myself for an example, I'll share something personal if it's okay with you. I went in for an interview and I never disclosed my disability because I was so scared that I was going to get fired or not even get the job. Let's put it that way, right?

So, I never said a word to anyone that I had a prosthetic leg or anything like this. And then I remember on the last medical, they asked me if there's anything I want to disclose and if I don't disclose it, I might not get the job. So, I quickly told them, and it was the fear of all of this, you know, being disabled, we should be open about what our disability is. And I can understand, you know, if they're trying to put me in a job where I have to pick up heavy stuff permanently, I don't know what it is.

Then I can understand the reasoning behind me not getting a job, but if I'm sitting by the desk and I'm working an admin job, that shouldn't be a problem. You know, there's, there's a whole lot of things. I think also we need to change our mindset towards disability. I think that's another big thing at the moment. Disability is something that everybody thinks is, you know, we can't do this and we can't do that. Don't set limits. And I think that's, that's the kind of things that we need to change in the companies as well is that anything is possible.

You know, I have a charity in Africa that fits kids with prosthetic legs and when these kids get fitted, the first thing we hear is, they won't be able to go to school. And I say, but why? What is wrong with them? And we always hear that, yeah, you know, they don't have legs or they don't have arms. And I'm saying, there's nothing wrong with them. They can still learn. They can still be able to get education. They can go into university. They can do anything they want. Don't create a boundary. Don't create a limit. And that's the kind of stuff that we need to break. We need to break those boundaries and limits. You know, there's so much of that in the world right now. We need to get rid of that and give people a fair opportunity.

Novie (18:35)

I'm speechless. I'm usually not speechless, but I'm speechless. Just, I, wow. That was truly amazing what you just said. I mean, I'm literally like sitting here in awe.

Tyrone (18:56)

What I say is what comes from my heart and it's the way I feel. I was born with a disability, so I know what it's like. I was judged by people, I was bullied, I went through all of this. So, we can relate. And the way I stand now, I'm what, 275 pounds, I'm six feet one. People don't look at my leg anymore. People look at me as this monster of a guy, right? It's completely different. And I think...

That's how the world must see us. They mustn't judge us by what they think is my disability. That's the thing. I don't have a disability. I have an ability. And that's one of the things I always say to people.

Novie (19:36)

And same thing I always say, just because I have a disability doesn't mean I can't drive a car, hold a job, play sports. You know, definitely being able to show people that what I'm able to do is just amazing.

Tyrone (19:50)

That's a powerful thing. I mean, by you showcasing and demonstrating that, it also changes the lives of so many others who think that they can't do it. Another story I'll share with you, I go to the gym and there's people that see me and I mean, I can do insane things in the gym. I mean, can deadlift, I think it's almost 700 pounds or something like that. And I can squat like 650.

Novie (20:13)

Nope, I can only squat 10 times.

Tyrone (20:16)

Okay, we'll work, we'll help you out. We'll get you strong. And the thing is when people see me, if I'm wearing long pants, they don't even realize that I have a prosthetic leg. It's only when I wear shorts and everything changes, like, oh my God, immediately people are shocked by you. But people don't realize what your abilities are, you know. It's, we're so quick to judge. We're so quick to, to look at somebody differently. And I think these are the types of stereotypes that we need to break.

Novie (20:41)

Tyrone, what does inclusion mean to you?

Tyrone (20:43)

Wow, inclusion for me, it's giving me opportunities. It's allowing me to be myself. It's allowing me to be free. And that's how I see inclusion. I think, at the moment, I come from a country where racism was a big problem, and we were never given opportunities. We were not included in a lot of things. And that's one of the reasons

why we couldn't play sport. So, we were hindered immediately from playing sport. So, I experienced it from that.

Then I experienced it from being disabled. I wasn't allowed to play from that. And then I found inclusion in the Paralympic movement where it became a home to me. And the best part is you walk around; nobody thinks of you as anything special. Nobody looks at, stares at you because you have a prosthetic leg or a prosthetic arm or in a wheelchair. Nobody stares at you. It's a completely different world. It's the first time you walk around where everybody treats you as a human being. And for me, that's the power of it.

I never felt so amazed in my life until I went into Rio, and I experienced Rio. It was mind blowing for me what I saw and came back from that a better human being. And I look at life so differently now because of that. So, I think for me, you know, the sport gave me so much in that it created a better human being and that's what I feel. And I think I'm a better human being today because of what I've learned from the Paralympics.

Novie (22:05)

Amazing. Wow. Personally, thank you so much for sitting down and talking to me about your involvement with Special Olympics. You're welcome. And I definitely cannot wait to meet you in person.

Tyrone (22:20)

Yeah, set up something and I'll be there. Don't worry.

Novie (22:22)

Oh I will, I'll make that happen. Okay.

Tyrone (22:26)

Okay, great, great stuff.

Novie (22:27)

A big thank you as well to Toyota for sponsoring this episode and their continued commitment to Special Olympics and athletes of all abilities. If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to subscribe to Inclusion Revolution Radio and follow us on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn at Special Olympics. We will see you next time for more incredible stories that celebrate community empowerment and inclusion. Thank you for listening to Inclusion Revolution Radio. Tune in again in two weeks for a new episode.