

MARYLINE MERTZ: Hello and welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Maryline Mertz. And I run the Origination Team [PH] across equities and FIC [PH] globally. I am truly delighted to welcome Michaël JÉRÉMIASZ to join us today. Michaël is a former wheelchair professional tennis player and a Paralympian. Michaël took up wheelchair tennis following a skiing accident. And very quickly he went on reaching the heights of professional tennis, ranking [UNINTEL] number one in both doubles and singles. He also represented France at the Olympian games in Athens, Beijing, London, and Rio. And he won a total of four Olympic medals, including a gold medal in Beijing. Michaël is now a sports commentator and ambassador for the Olympian games in Paris in 2024.

MICHAËL JÉRÉMIASZ: Well, thank you very much for the invitation Maryline.

MARYLINE MERTZ: So, Michaël, over to you now. But let's start at the beginning. You were injured in a skiing accident at the age of 18. Can you tell us a bit about the journey you went through in your recovery?

MICHAËL JÉRÉMIASZ: Well, I wasn't always in a wheelchair as you said. I had a snow skiing accident when I was 18 years old. I was with my family. It's always been our favorite sport. And you know, you're at that age where you want to impress your brothers, impress your friends. And I actually impressed them. We had a challenge in the snow park with my brothers and one of my closest friends. And the challenge was, as stupid and simple as it was, to jump the highest as possible.

My friend did a few jumps before. Did three jumps. Did pretty good. But I wanted to do better. And instead of slowing down between the second and third jump I actually kept the speed up and I lost control. I went up around 10 meters high, which is quite high. And instead of landing, you know, downhill of the jump, I landed on the side of the jump, which was ice, like a pack of ice. And I broke my two legs and my spine. So that's when I became paraplegic.

I didn't know at the time what happened to me because I had a black out of four days. Just a few reminders that my brother gave me because they were. They witnessed the fall happen to me. So it's been-- it's a bit complicated because the first few days, especially for my family, they had no idea what would happen. My father is a doctor, so he knew at the time what it

meant to have broken legs. But especially to have the spinal cord injury. It was like a very stressful element in their lives, much more than me because I was in intensive care and I had no idea what was happening.

So it's been the toughest three weeks of my life when I was, actually, at the hospital, [UNINTEL]. I was really, you know, close with many, many people in my family. Of course my friends, like probably 50 - 100 people every day wanted to come and show their support. But at the same time every evening, every night I was alone in my bed literally crying and being desperate because I had no idea what life would be. That was 20 years ago. At that time in France, I mean it's still quite-- we're quite invincible, but at that time I had no idea what kind of life somebody in a wheelchair could have, someone disabled, like a young man in our society.

But progressively and quite fastly sports went into this journey, in this rehabilitation, reeducation. And sports, not to be an athlete, but sports to just be able to do the verily the most basic things you teach your kids, your children, when they are one or two years old. I just ended being 18 years old with, like, the life of 18 years old. But what the ability, the independence of a 10 months old kid. So, that was the tricky part.

And sports just really helped me at the time to be more independent. To be able to go from my bed to my wheelchair, from my wheelchair to the toilet to the shower to dress up. All those things that you teach your kids when they're very, very young, you have to start from scratch, basically. And which I did. Luckily surrounded by some amazing nurses, care assistants, doctors, family, friends, because you don't rebuild yourself. That's what I realized two years after, that I had the chance to have, like, this amazing entourage who knew exactly what to do and when to do it.

So, it's been-- after that nine months in the rehab center where basically around all of this I met some unbelievable people. I like very fastly realized that being paraplegic is, of course, not like a random stuff. But it's not the end of the world. I realized quickly that there were many things I would be able to do. I wasn't focusing on the things I wouldn't be able to do anymore. I just decided that I'll be the one making sure that this or that will be the things that I can or can't do, but not because the society or whoever has decided for me.

MARYLINE MERTZ: How inspiring a recovery. And of course then afterwards you went on to become a world-renowned tennis player. And you even won the gold medal in the Olympian games. What I'd like to know is what role did sport have in your life before the accident? And how did you come up with picking up tennis afterwards?

MICHAËL JÉRÉMIASZ: Well, I've been raised in a family where sports have always been an important thing. Not like-- I mean, my father and my mother, we can't really tell they are the most athletic people in the world, but they always loved sports. It started with skiing, snow skiing. But there I was able to walk, I've been starting to ski when I was two years old. I started tennis when I was five years old. My older brother, my younger brother were [UNINTEL] pairs as well. It's always been the sport of the family. And sport has always been balanced, like a balance, a proper balance in my life.

I was unhappy when I was injured. I wasn't, like, psychologically feeling well when I was physically, you know, like weaker because of an injury or because of an ability. So always had to balance those things. So it's been part of my life.

But then I realized that it was bringing me much more. It was just giving me the ability to just do much more things than the limitations of the wheelchair and of the society. This is a society, whereas we're talking about France or even England, less England but more in France at the time, society is inaccessible. It's discriminated for people like us. So, sports helped me just to be able to say, okay, I want to go there.

So, to be able to go there I'm going to be able to better balance in my wheelchair. I'm going to have to be stronger in my upper body because my arms became my legs. So that's what happened. But I was a tennis player and I've heard [PH] by accident in my rehab center that wheelchair was actually a sport. I had no idea. I've never seen that on TV. It was born in the late '70s in America. And I was like, okay, let's try.

So I tried wheelchair tennis in my rehab center. And rapidly because I'd never seen the wheelchair like the cold, heavy enemy, I've seen that as a partner who could give me independence and autonomy, I just, like, transferred my knowledge and my abilities of being a tennis player to the wheelchair. Took me a while to be able to really handle the wheelchair and the specificities of wheelchair tennis. Took me

years and years. But rapidly I like the pleasure [PH]. And well, that was the key for me to sports.

So, I started wheelchair tennis in November 2000. My accident was in February of 2000. So that was quite quick. I trained a lot. I was still studying at the time, but I trained a lot, like five times a week. That's when I met Patrick Mouratoglou. He was my partner [UNINTEL]. I met him when he had-- he was the coach of Serena Williams. He was having his Académie Mondiale near Paris. So I went there, and he started to partnership with me to just give me a physical trainer and the ability to train. I was of course [UNINTEL] at that time I didn't have any sponsors and stuff. So it's been quite a fast improvement in the sport. Had good results. I was the national champion in late 2001. And then I had my first selection in the Games, Paralympic Games was like a dream for me. You just go to the most high-class events in the world, the most recognized event, and I was in Athens in 2004. And that's where I got four years after my accident four-- two medals, the bronze in singles and the silver in doubles. So, yeah, that was-- became more than just, like, something which gives me pleasure or independence. Then it became my life. It gives me an identity. Gives me, like, a new purpose, new goals. I wanted to achieve more. I wanted to be the best in what I do. Not just to say, "Hey, guys, look, I'm the best." Yeah, of course, I've done it with my brothers and my friends just to remind them I was the best. But just because I always wanted to prove to myself that if I work hard enough, there's a way to be better. It doesn't mean to be the best, but to be better and to be close from what I'm able to give in the best situation. If it tends [UNINTEL], even better. But I always wanted to make sure that I'm the one who will just reach my limits, not anyone else putting limits to me.

So yeah, as you said, brought me the year after, 2005, to become number one in the world in singles and doubles, which is the highest recognition for a tennis player because it means you've been the best, you know, all year long. And then the [UNINTEL] the top of the top in 2008 when with my doubles partner got the gold medal in Beijing, and I had the bronze and silver already. Then I ended having the gold and probably being the-- yeah, the highest in my life in terms of sports emotions because no matter if you're an Olympian or Paralympian you are a [UNINTEL]-- I don't know if we can say so, but you know what I mean. It's like all athletes from the world gathering together. There's no wars at the time. There's no more like discrimination. You are who you are. You're here to represent your country with having the same goals. You [UNINTEL] exactly the same conditions. There's

no, like, rich or poor countries. You have the same food, the same beds, the same everything. And then we have two weeks of, like, very special [UNINTEL]. Quite hard to describe.

So yeah, it's been very important in my life because it became my job. I was the first disabled professional athlete in France. And [UNINTEL] others now. But yeah, it's been an amazing journey because of-- not just because of the results, because I could have done better. I'm pretty sure I could. But because of all the emotions it brought me, brought to me, and all the ability to share those emotions with people I care the most. It's been 15 amazing years I've spent [UNINTEL].

MARYLINE MERTZ: Thank you for sharing Michaël. Let's move onto to you explain the Olympian games. You've spoken about how the London events in particular was particularly special as a Paralympian with stadiums for each sport, for each event, and people stopping you in the street, and I'm quoting you, "Stopping you in the streets as a professional athlete, not as a professional disabled athlete." What do you think was so different about the London games that made this approach possible?

MICHAËL JÉRÉMIASZ: Well, London changed the game. You know, right after the Olympics, not the Paralympics, you could see Channel 4 who had the very good idea to decide to broadcast the Paralympics after BBC wasn't really keen. And they said, "That was the advert. Thanks for the warmup." That's the beginning of the communication of the London Paralympic committee. "Thanks for the warmup," just after the games. And that wasn't just, like, provocation. It was perfectly found because that's what happened. They had, like, records of-- yeah, they beat the BBC in terms of, like, number of spectators. The stadiums were full. But not full because as you said people were coming to watch disabled athletes, they were coming to see a show. They were coming to see performance.

But with stories. The storytelling was the key as well. We are top athletes. We have the same journey in terms of, like, having to train hard. [UNINTEL] it happens that for many of us we had to face something that for the rest of you it just seems unbearable, unfaceable [PH], unsurviveable [PH]. But the thing is, that's where it comes much stronger.

I mean, if you love sports what do you like to see? It's like a show. Like of a show. Like performances. But you want to feel emotions. And you had the perfect combo during the Paralympics.

So, that was-- I was proud. Like I've never been proud before. I was happy to be a Paralympian, but not proud. You know? Pride is something different. I was a proud Paralympian. And that's where it came, the hashtag proud Paralympian, that's where it starts.

And so then London just put the bar quite high. So that was really exciting, really moving. And then when we arrived in 2016 in Rio, that was tough. For me it was the toughest place in the world to just follow London. I was quite happy with Paris as we've been bidding for three times and lost three times against you guys, of course, in 2012. But I was happy that when I've just-- after London, because I could tell you, like France and Paris would have never been able to do 50 percent of what London and Great Britain had achieved. So, it's still a [UNINTEL] for us about what we're hoping to change because today I mean I live in London for two years now and I can see just by watching TV how, you know, like ahead you are compared to France when it just comes, you know, to media or politics about disabled people. So, yeah, it's been very special.

And every athlete, every politician who's been involved, every sponsor, they will tell you there was a before and after in the history of Paralympics. And it was definitely this one.

So the challenge now is Tokyo, of course, next year. But Tokyo is having to fight with other stuff. But Paris, as we finally made it, have like a few more years. Four. It's not a lot to-- I hope at least be able to do what London has done for the Paralympics. Olympics, I'm very [UNINTEL]. For Paralympics I have big hopes. That's why I'm involved. But I know it's a huge challenge.

MARYLINE MERTZ: Very good. I mean, obviously you've spoken about the Paralympics sports have gained increased attention over the past few years. But let's face it, there is still some way to go. And what you said in the media was that visibility was key to moving the needle. What are some of the ways we can really see change in this space?

MICHAËL JÉRÉMIASZ: Well, basically we talk about the media. We talk about legislation. I mean, I was having discussions a few weeks ago with the First Lady in France, of course she's involved and she's amazing and her husband [UNINTEL] about what needs to be done. You know, in France when you don't hire for companies over [UNINTEL] percent of disabled people, you know, with [UNINTEL] the low. But I want to live in a world where we don't need to penalize anyone. We just want to explain and

convince people that a good society is a society which represents the diversity of the society. It's not just like a [UNINTEL], it has to make sense. When we talk about that for men and women, it has to make sense. Not just because it's good in the photo to have the same amount of men and women. We have the same problem, just newer in the civil rights fights, but it's exactly the same problem. You have, like, millions of disabled people in France, like around 12 million. You have, like, we evaluate 800 million disabled people in the world. So we're not talking about a few people, few hundred people.

And what is disability at the end of the day? You know? What is disability? We all have our disabilities. We all have our inabilities. And we are [UNINTEL] population. So, to me that's a universal problem. So, of course, media is a part of it. Companies, NGOs, charities, but individuals. I want people when they're on the street and when they just face someone different, is like me or I could be the same. I'm born somewhere. But I could be born in another country. I was born healthy, but I could have been unhealthy. Was born wealthy, but I could have been born unwealthy. It's not something we choose.

So, it depends-- I mean what's the world we want to live in? You know? And I'm not like someone [UNINTEL] like in terms of believing like-- can I say that? I'm aware of the world, how the world is and how it works. But still, I'm not accepting it. So my job, my jobs are to-- it's a very humble position is to change the world. My job is to change the world and to just, like, fight against this discrimination. And to do so I can't do it by myself. And luckily, I'm not doing it by myself. But I know I need every person, no matter their responsibilities, to at the end of the day just make sure that we all have the same rights and same abilities.

I'm not asking to have ramps everywhere in every corner for disabled people or people in a wheelchair, no. I want common sense. I want to feel that people are just talking and willing to live together. I mean it sounds like probably my future political program when I'll be running for president in France. So maybe you're the first to hear it. In England I would need probably to get the British citizenship in two years. Who knows. But basically, yeah, that's what motivates me every single day. What's the point of having all the privileges and all the doors open if I'm not using them to do something which makes sense?

MARYLINE MERTZ: In the world we live in, it obviously changed, you know, dramatically this year. Pandemic had a

massive impact on the sporting events across the world. How has this year changed for you? You're no longer traveling, no longer competing in sports events. But how has this changed for you this year? And how have you kept busy during the tough lockdowns that we all experienced?

MICHAËL JÉRÉMIASZ: Well, just before the lockdown I was training for an Ironman because, you know, when you're a former athlete you get never tired of it. So, I'm not playing tennis anymore. But I was like, okay, what is one of the toughest things to do, especially in a wheelchair? So it was to attempt an Ironman. So, I've been training a lot. And when I got confined it was tricky because I knew they would cancel the Ironman. Which they did. But I want to keep fit. So I've been doing lots of sports because, again, it's a part of my life and I need to make sure I keep fit and busy. But it's been a revelation for me because my son, I have a little son, a boy, born in March 2016. I've seen him the first two months of his life because I refused to go play tennis. But I had to go back to courts and travel to qualify for the games. And then I was the flag bearer. So I've been very busy media-wise before the games. Then I went to the games. So I haven't seen my son as much as I would have, you know, wished to see him. So I missed that. I mean, I was still there, but I missed that.

And after that I knew, because my wife told me, when-- she's British, she told me after retiring I would have to [UNINTEL] live in England, like you know, what she did in France. So I knew it was coming. So I worked a lot. I mean I'm a hard worker. I'm passionate about what I do. And the risk is that you don't, like, spending enough time with-- at the end of the day to me, is the most important. So to me it's been like three months, like unbelievable, because I've been full time with my wife and my son. I've never spent more than two weeks, maybe on the [UNINTEL] with my wife [UNINTEL] have always been traveling and she knew when we were together. And my son. Like every single day. Sharing that. Yeah. I've been lucky, I've been very lucky. So you know, when there's a glass I always see the half empty-- or the half full. Sorry. Then the half empty basically. That's what I needed. And I actually discovered the world and what people were facing.

I just discovered that millions and millions of disabled people face every single day. To be suddenly having to face adversity. To be suddenly locked up. We are locked up. You have people being locked up every single day because their house is not accessible when they had the accidents. I have people and I work

with people who have to wait for their friends every Friday night that they finish with work to then come and pick them up from their third floor with the lift in their place. And it's not just one isolated case. The reality is that what we had to face is already the [UNINTEL] life of way too many people. I'm not saying that it justifies anything. But what I realized, and that's what I advise to people, that when you face adversity, it's not easy. But just take one second, even one second, once in a while, to like, okay, what am I talking about? What is the limitation there? Okay. I'm going to be less productive. Okay, I'm going to make less benefits. Okay, I'm not going to be as good as I was playing. Maybe I'm not going to be able to [UNINTEL] these things I was planning at the end of the year. Maybe I'm not going to travel the world.

I'm the same. I love life. And I live whatever my life and my job can give me. I mean I love traveling. I love being able to do whatever I feel when I feel it. I like amazing holidays and plans, and trips planned this year. I haven't done any at all. Of course I'm frustrated. But everybody's frustrated. But when you look at [UNINTEL] and you compare just-- and I'm not [UNINTEL] but I'll just take this case, when you tell to people who just work to survive, to have food on their plate, not to, you know, buy a bigger house or just, like, bigger ring for their wife or like studies for the kids, I mean, I'm being [UNINTEL] caricature, but again, without any [UNINTEL], I don't know if you can say that Maryline, you [UNINTEL], I know you speak better English than me, but basically disability to once in a while just like realizing what are we talking about? What is [UNINTEL] going to be lasting for? It will change your life. It changes your life. And don't wait to face a real drama in your life to suddenly be able to face those everyday issues. Because we all have issue. We're all victims of life accidents, all of us, at a point.

When it comes with work, there are going to be moments where work is going to be challenged and it's been happening these last few months. Probably in your company as well. When you basically, you know, have like family, relatives, parents, grandparents being sick, death, I mean all of this is part of life. We know it's a part of life. The idea is not to be depressed everyday to prepare that. But it's like being aware that it's a part of life. You know? We [UNINTEL] to born. We live. We die. So what is it going to be? What is our journey going to be? Or are we going to just exploit it and make our life the best that's possible?

So being able once in a while to make a step back, [UNINTEL] like, phew, okay, tonight I'm going to join the people I love. Tonight I'm going to have like a warm bed. Tonight I'm going to have a nice meal. It seems nothing when you know that you have that for granted. But once in a while, honestly, it can really change things.

MARYLINE MERTZ: What a nice way as well to end up this interview together. We could go on forever. But sadly our time is up. So, I'd like to tell you how much it's been a pleasure to be with you today. Thank you for taking the time. It's been an amazing story. Thank you very much.

MICHAËL JÉRÉMIASZ: It's been a pleasure as well. Thanks a lot.

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