

Arch Insurance International Pursuing Better Together Podcast: Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson

Arch Insurance International:

Today we have the privilege of speaking to Baroness Grey-Thompson, one of the UK's most successful Paralympic athletes. She is also a crossbench peer in the House of Lords, a motivational speaker, a broadcaster and a mother. Firstly, welcome to the Arch Insurance Pursuing Better Together podcast, Tanni, it's fantastic to have the opportunity to speak to you today.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Thank you, I'm really looking forward to it.

Arch Insurance International:

I wanted to start our talk, if I can, by taking you right back to the beginning, to get an understanding of where you think that early drive and ambition that has seen you achieve so much actually came from.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

I think it probably came from my parents who are both quite strong willed in slightly different ways. I think my parents were certainly incredibly supportive of me. I was born with spina bifida, I could walk a little bit when I was young but as I grew, my spine collapsed and my own vertebrae severed my spinal cord. And my parents made a decision not to treat me any differently, not to wrap me in cotton wool. I think they always saw the competitiveness in me and my mum said this in a really lovely way. I've got an older sister and my sister was very well behaved; if you told Sian to sit somewhere, she'd sit and I was the one that would kind of try and run away. And my mum said to me, quite jokingly once, that actually it was kind of easier that I was the one that couldn't really walk very well, because she had to have eyes in the back of the head all the time with me, apparently. I don't remember that bit. But yeah, my parents just encouraged me to be physically active and that was more about pushing my chair around and living an independent life, and they sort of funnelled me into sport, and also academia because they just thought it was good for me.

Arch Insurance International:

And of course, you said in the past, that they really impressed upon you this idea that anything is possible and the wheelchair is not something that should hold you back in any way, shape, or form. I suppose it's that base level of encouragement that you got, right from the get-go.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

I think by the age of five or so I was using a wheelchair and I think they were quite shocked about how even people that we knew suddenly changed their attitudes towards me, which was suddenly, "oh, you can't do this, and you can't do that". My parents were told I'd never get an education or a job or get married or have children, and you know, I was as a kid. And I think that had a big impact on them. My father was an architect, and he knew how inaccessible the world was because he helped build it, and I think they were worried that if they made my world so small, where the house I grew up in was the only place I could live that I'd never do anything. So, my father refused to make a house particularly wheelchair accessible. I also had an impairment that it wasn't such a big deal; I could get out my chair, I could crawl up the stairs, I could do things for myself. So, actually, that was really important for me as a child, in terms of not having everything done for me. I think it's hard because the attitudes towards disabled people at the time were really negative. My parents were told that if I'd been born a couple of years earlier, I'd been taken away, not fed and allowed to die. That's the sort of the context of the time that I was growing up.

Arch Insurance International:

It sounds as though your parents really fought against that and actually used the anger and frustration that was the kind of responses that they were getting from people in senior positions, people that were authorities.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Yeah. I was lucky, I started off in mainstream school because I could walk when I joined. And then when I became paralyzed, my head teacher just didn't tell anybody to be honest, because I should have been put into a special ed. And when I came to go to high school, and I thought I was going to go to the school my sister was at, we had a letter from the head teacher that said, "we don't take people like Tanni at our school". My Dad threatened to sue the Secretary State for Wales over my right to go to a mainstream school using work done by Mary Baroness Warnock. Little did I know at that point, my life later on will be made up of reading white and green papers. But the fact that my dad was educated, wasn't put off, wasn't scared, knew how to write really stroppy letters and take on the system at a point where people didn't, that was amazing. But I grew up in a house where that was sort of like, my dad is saying, "we're going to do this. Okay. Right. Yeah." And a lot of families didn't have that kind of support.

Arch Insurance International:

It sounds as well that sort of positivity and that drive was throughout your family because I know that your grandfather seemed to be quite a positive thinker as well and quite a driven individual. I love this and correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe he used to tell you to aim high, even if you hit a cabbage. Is that correct?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

We're not really sure where it came from, because no one's ever heard of it but he used to say this to me all the time and be like, okay, and I think that was good. And then the other side, that was my mum's dad, my father's dad was a competitive motorcyclist and competed between the wars and then his father stopped him competing, apparently. He was really, really talented but his dad didn't think that was a proper job and my grandfather never really got over that. And I think that set a really important tone for my dad, and then my mum to say, "well, okay, do stuff that you love with your life. But also, you need to travel, you need to see stuff, to do that you need a good job, and to do that you need an education". So, Dad used to say all the time, "education gives you choices", and I find myself saying that to young athletes. So, formal education, my dad was the first one in his family to go to university. He saw that as unlocking lots of gates, which is really true.

Arch Insurance International:

Absolutely. And just coming back to that point about ambition and drive as well. I believe that it was around the age of 13 when you set your sights as it were on becoming a wheelchair athlete. In terms of aspiration at that point, that very early stage in your sporting career, how high were you starting to aim at that point? Did you have aspirations that were at national level, world level, record breaking, were you driven to that degree from the start?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Definitely 13 was like national level because we had national junior games, which were really competitive. Because the special school system was good for sport, it wasn't great for anything else. I didn't know about the Paralympics at that point, but I knew about the London Marathon, and I remember watching a Welsh athlete called Chris Hallam, who was the first disabled person I saw that was really sort of out there. He had appalling taste in leopard print body suits, he had dyed blond hair and a tan, he was rude and obnoxious, and he became one of my best friends in sport. Because the representation of disabled people I'd seen up to that point were either, a lot of children

who nobody had aspirations for them or watching TV, and it was Ironside who's a wheelchair user or Sandy Richardson on Crossroads and I knew they were non-disabled, and their experience never matched up to mine, because Ironside would always catch the criminal, going up five flights of stairs and a set of cobbles, and so, that wasn't real to me, but the London Marathon was. So, I do remember at the time of 13 saying to my mum, "I'm going to do the London Marathon one day" and she was like "oh okay, that's nice". And then I think five years later, I did it pretty much the first year I could compete.

Arch Insurance International:

At that point, did you feel that responsibility on you to demonstrate, to show to the wider world what was possible?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

It didn't feel like a responsibility, and it wasn't proving to anyone else but me. And it does get quite complicated, because I think there are bits where some of the discrimination I faced and some of the negative attitudes, it is like, "right, I'll show you". But it's not about, I don't think, showing them as a disabled person. I think I would have been the same type of person whether I've been a wheelchair user or not, because the stubbornness that was in my mum, that's in my sister, that's in me, that's in my daughter, you can see that's kind of a family trait.

Arch Insurance International:

Yes. You mentioned there the success that you achieved in I suppose what some might consider to be a relatively short space of time in terms of your sporting career. It was about five years after making your international debut. At that point, you were already a multi gold medal winning athlete, a world record holder across multiple distances. And I suppose there might be an assumption that that was an incredibly rapid success trajectory that was achieved, but I just want to get a sense from you what was happening behind the scenes, how much work was going into achieving those heights?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Yeah, so the first sort of five years I competed, I didn't win a race because the best girl in Britain went to my school and was in my year. So, as a junior, what actually was really good at that time, I found a club and I found a coach and I learned to train because actually, that's a big part of it. And then I went to Loughborough University where if you want to go training at five o'clock in the morning, you could find 10 people to go training with you. So, you're in this environment, which is about training hard, but it was also about training smart. And a lot of it is just luck on timing in terms of my age. So, I graduated in '91 and then I had a year, so I'd made big jumps at 19 and 20. But then actually having a year to consolidate that for the Barcelona Paralympics, which was my second games, made a big difference. If I'd graduated the year after or two years, it might not have happened. So, by the time I was at university, training pretty hard, really hard going into Barcelona, [training] twice a day, six days a week, for 50 weeks of the year. And I think what I was good at doing was making myself do the things that I wasn't good at.

Arch Insurance International:

How important was that? That ability to push yourself in areas where you were struggling to a degree or that wasn't where you're excelling?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Yeah, so there's a big part of it in terms of planning, and I love planning, I love Excel spreadsheets. I don't really like surprises. So for me, the planning of the training was a really important part of it. I had lots of different coaches through my career and pulled different people in to help and advise

me, but there was a big part of it, I wanted to be in control of that. And then, things like my starts were not the best, which is not brilliant when you're a sprinter. So, I'd do starts every day in training. So rather than avoiding the things that were hard, I was like, "right, the only way I'm going to get better is to keep doing it again, and again and again". I could push downhill incredibly quickly but there's not many track races that are downhill. You need that skill to be able to push at your top speed, but you need to be able to do the hard stuff. In the whole of my career, there were very few training sessions that I missed. Even when I was pregnant, I trained all the way through. I was back training when my daughter was two weeks old. You've got to commit to this, because it can be really easy to walk away from the track, convince yourself, "Oh, well, I'll do it tomorrow, I'll catch up". You can't and what I say is it's all pennies in the bank. When I say that to my daughter, she rolls her eyes at me, but you put a couple of pennies in every day and when it matters, then you've got this bank to call on, as opposed to you can't stick them all in two weeks before.

Arch Insurance International:

Absolutely. And what you've already touched upon there was just the diversity of different types of events that you were competing in. From those short, really impactful races through to marathons. And of course, that places very different demands on you both physically and mentally, I would assume. How were you adapting? How are you able to adapt to those different types of race environment?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Well, the first thing is pretty much everyone in wheelchair racing does a whole range of distances. So, I wasn't unique in that. A marathon for us is over pretty quickly, so it's basically just a whole series of sprints joined up together, so it's more like cycling. If you look at Mark Cavendish, the toughest bit of the race for him is the first 100 miles and if he's in the right place for the sprint at the finish, he can do incredibly well. So, we're much more like cycling than running, and actually to be a good sprinter, you need to do miles and they're not the same as running miles because obviously you've got bits where you coast and you recover and in a sprint session you can build up a lot of miles, even if you're only doing 15 sprints. So, we train more like cycling than running and the way we race in terms of drafting, slipstreaming, all that type of thing, tactics, building the racing chair, cycling helmets, lycra, it all comes from cycling

Arch Insurance International:

Of course, and you talked there about getting your starts right and investing the time and energy into those starts. One of your many accolades was the fact that you were the first woman to break the 60 second barrier for the 400 meters. And of course, in that kind of a race, you're talking about fractions of seconds that matter and that commitment to shaving those very marginal times off your total time. That must take a real level of commitment to that constant incremental improvement.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

It's never ending. To compete in 100 meters in Athens, which was my last games, my team manager asked me to break my personal best. So even though I had the qualifying time, he was like, "No, you need to do more than that". So, I trained for four years to break my personal best by naught point naught one of a second. As a young athlete, you make these massive jumps and the older you get, it gets harder and harder and that's when you've got to put in the real slog, you know, when it's cold outside. I live in the Northeast of England, winter is not great, but for me, it's easier to go out and do a bit every day, sometimes be doing 30 miles in a training session. You just you get up, you get it done, and then you can sleep. So, yeah, it's kind of weird. But you never know, when that jump in improvements is going to happen, and sometimes it takes a really long time and then sometimes you can just have the most magical season where almost every time you go out you break a personal best.

Arch Insurance International:

Yes. I suppose in that kind of environment, it's probably easier to maintain that momentum because you're constantly achieving those highs. But when things aren't going to plan, when you're not hitting the heights of that you know you can achieve, how do you maintain the momentum at that point? Where do you find the inspiration to keep pushing?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

So, I think we try to level out the highs and lows as much as possible, because if you win at a Paralympic final and break a world record, it's amazing, but also there is so much more to the narrative than that. I've won races where I've maybe not been the best in the field, but I've had a lucky break, or you don't win for all sorts of reasons. So, after every race, we'd go through the same process of analysis to say, "Okay, what was good, what wasn't good? What do I need to improve? What decisions did I take?", and that would level out some of the highs and lows. But I had so many years as a junior, where I was improving, but nobody really saw it. I remember I won the last opportunity I had to compete at junior nationals, I won the 100 metres national title, and it was fascinating, I was 16 and everyone's around me going, "Oh, you're so good. We always knew you were going to be good". No, you didn't, so I think a lot of again, that came from my parents and my mum was, "did you win?", my dad was "did you race well?". And I think having that, I'm really lucky that my dad, if I'd won, but I said "Yeah, but it wasn't the best I could be", he was like, "hmm okay", so that kind of influence as a young athlete was really positive, actually.

Arch Insurance International:

You talk there about that analysis that goes on after every race, and that ability to learn from every race. Just stepping back a little bit, do you think that to a degree, we devalue the price of losing, of failing at times, because there's so much that you learn about yourself during that period that could potentially be lost, because we devalue it.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Yeah, and I think that's why it's important to step back and look at both winning and losing to do an evaluation. The reality is the medal table is based on golds. Silvers only count when there's a tie for gold and bronzes only count when there's a tie for gold and silver. So as an individual, at my first games I won a bronze, I was absolutely over the moon, it was one of the best races that I'd ever done. Did my team manager care? Not really. He was lovely, he was like, "Oh, well done, that's nice.", but he would have preferred a silver, and he would have preferred a gold. So I think it's understanding that reality, and something that was really important for me, although identifying as an athlete, and my parents again, were like "you've got to have perspective in your life and you've got to be a Venn diagram". And it's slightly weird, because people still say to me, "Oh, you're that athlete", and I retired, really at the back end of 2006, early 2007. I was working in Tokyo, and just before I went out, I was at the petrol station and somebody said to me, "oh, good luck in Tokyo", and he's like, "how's the training going?", and then it's all that very British awkwardness to go "oh I've retired". Does he think at 52 I'm still competing? So, it's like "oh, thank you", very British, I've been practicing my commentary, it's funny. So, for me, it was really important actually, when you, you transfer out, it's really important to have that wider perspective because if all you think of yourself is this binary person, it's just very difficult. So, people's recollection of my career, like Paralympic finals or London marathons, the reality of that Paralympics, so I won 16 medals across five games, that's 19 and a half minutes of my life. The reality is training on the trunk road between Redcar and Middlesbrough covered in snot.

Arch Insurance International:

Yes, this is the thing, as you said, they acknowledge and they recognise the medals, but nobody is

aware of what's gone into that. You have retired now, you retired in 2007. I suppose at that point, was there a sense of excitement of - you had devoted so much of your life up to that point to your sporting career - what's next or was there regret that you were leaving behind?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

No, no regrets at all. I was so ready to stop. I knew in Athens that I wasn't going to do Beijing. Absolutely. There was no way I could do another four years. I was going to stop in 2005, and I spent most of that year sick, and I just couldn't hang together any training and then, so I decided to do one more year. It was actually Dave Moorcroft (ex-runner), who said to me, "you're a long time retired". And it's okay, right if I do 2006, and the World Championships are going to be in Holland, that's a nice place to stop, that was where my first World Champs were, and the plan all the way through was that I was going to be done at Worlds. And then there was a British race called Paralympic World Cup, which was May 2007, and the organizers said to me, just before worlds, "tell you what, you want to retire in Manchester at the Paralympic World Cup?". So pretty much I really struggled that 2006-7 winter. But it was nice to be able to actually have all my family around for that final race. But I was relieved to stop, because I was 36, I was kind of physically and mentally broken. I was just done and also excited about doing something else. And I do remember thinking "this is going to be amazing, because I'm going to stop being called an athlete. I'm going to do something else", and actually, that's never gone away. It took a while to kind of find peace with that and now I'm at a place to go "that's really sweet". Normally, they'll say things like "you're not as skinny as you used to be", or "the BBC are very good makeup artists", but I think it's finding that balance. And I was really excited, I was working on the 2012 games and that was an amazing opportunity, which I couldn't have done if I was competing,

Arch Insurance International:

Of course. How do you go about making that transition? Because you've been in a very controlled, structured environment, and now you're coming out of that, you're having to refocus to set yourself new goals to aim high, but in completely different environments to a degree. How did you go about changing that mindset and your approach to facilitate that transition?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

I started planning my transition when I was 21, so I had 15 years to figure it out. That's partly because, really aware that you might not get selected, if you have a bad season going into a Paralympic Games and you don't hit the qualifying times, because you're injured, you don't go. So, I think I was always aware from a really young age that it's quite transitory, your position on the team. And it's down to a lot of other things. And the way that British athletics Paralympic team selection works is that the team are allocated a number of places. It's not like the Olympic team, where you can take up to three people per event if you hit certain qualifying marks. They're given a number, and the team manager has to select say the 40 who are closest to winning a gold medal. So, in some events you may have two British athletes competing, or one, so it's a very different type of selection. So, ultimately, I was competing against the field eventers and long jumpers and the amputee sprinters to get my place on the team, not against anyone in my category. So, I think it's always recognising that, and I always tried to do other things while I was competing, partly because you can't train 20 hours a day. And my dad, again, used to say, "you're really boring if that's all you've got. I don't really care that you did 12 200ms last night. Lovely, but it's not very interesting". And the other thing that I say to young athletes, and I think this came from an interview I read with Michael Jordan years ago, where he used to say that he used to read international newspapers because if you're sitting at a dinner next to a sponsor, you've got to be able to have a conversation on their level. They don't care what you did in training, there's only so much you can talk about training. So, yeah, that transition was planned. So, when I retired, I knew what I didn't want to do. I was offered a

couple of things that might have paid really well but I was able to say, "I'm okay, it doesn't fit with what I'm doing next". I wasn't having to make any knee jerk decisions about what I did.

Arch Insurance International:

I suppose as well, a lot of the personal traits that you would associate with a sports person suddenly come into their own when you move outside of that sector or that arena. That determination, that willingness to push, that desire to constantly aim higher, that must have set you up, that must provide a great foundation in any arena to push forward.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

I think one of the most important things with an athlete is that you're afraid of failing, but you're not afraid of putting yourself on the start line where you may fail. It's all very complicated. So, I think it lets you try things. And also, my early experience in sport, I played loads of different sports before I found wheelchair racing. At 11, 12 I thought wheelchair racing was really boring, because you go around in circles, but I did it because I wasn't very good at most other sports. So, it was only because of that, that I tried it. So, I think what it teaches you to do is, in sport you're always having to reinvent yourself. You can't just do the same training you did last year; you have to find different ways in different chairs, and different technology. So, it gives you a level of resilience. Also, I think one of the most important things is that you're not afraid to ask questions. You're constantly asking for feedback as an athlete and then life outside, you're saying, "how do we do this?". And me moving into politics, I see people who sometimes come from big business, who are the experts and it's really hard for them to ask some of those challenging question like, why are we doing this? Whereas sport takes away that fear of just saying, "tell me how it works? Why are we doing it? How can I be better?".

Arch Insurance International:

That's quite interesting as well, that when you are interacting in that business arena and you have that willingness to ask questions, that willingness to question yourself as well, and to acknowledge, failings and how to be better. That's probably not something you necessarily associate with the business environment. How have you found that ability to interact with a very, I suppose, different mentality?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

I think in sport, no one turns up on the start line trying to be bad. It just happens. So, I think one of the things that you see in business, as people move up and get promoted, it sometimes becomes harder for them to build that network around them, of trusted friends or critical friends. In sport, you can't survive unless you've got your training partner who are your critical friends, and the advice and the feedback are always very immediate, it's in the moment. It's probably during the training session, not even at the end of a training session. So, you do have to be the right sort of person and you have to have the right connection with your coach as well, to be able to take that feedback and move on. But I think some of the stuff I see in business where you get a personal review twice a year, you're trying to figure out what happened six months ago. In our training group, we had a lot of quite strict rules of how you could speak to each other and what you could say, because you couldn't go, "that was rubbish". I mean, sometimes you could say that, but you've got to know and understand the person too. So, the best coach I've had is the person who coached me in the way that worked for me, not in the way that he wanted to coach me, and that's really important.

Arch Insurance International:

I suppose one of the different things as well, of course, is that in the business environment, you're often dealing with tens of people, hundreds of people, thousands of people, where you don't get

that level of interaction, perhaps, to really understand individuals and what might motivate them or what might push them.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

And you don't get the time either, in terms of knowing how somebody ticks. So, within my training group, some of the guys I used to train with, some of the sessions we did, they used to push me all over the track and the road, to make it hard for me, because then when you've done that 20 times in training, when you've then got to do it in a race, you've got pennies in the bank to call on. You can go "I've made that decision before, you're not making new decisions and sometimes you repeat the decision you made and it might work or not work, but you've had that experience. I remember, in some of the sessions we were doing on the track where the guys used to block me and somebody said, "Oh, that's really mean". No, because if that happens in a race in a Paralympic final, my race is done.

Arch Insurance International:

It's taking you out of any sort of sense of comfort zone as well. You're constantly being challenged.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Yeah, and you can make a rational decision. I commentate now and I'm really conscious as it's really easy for me on the sideline to say, "well, so and so should have done that, or why didn't they do that? Or they need to make a break now", but actually, part of the reason I commentate is because I've been there, when your heart rate is 205 and you're in a pack, the decision-making process is really different. I really relished that, because when you come out of it, and you do well, and you make the right decision, whether that's a Paralympic final or a training session, you go "that was a good day".

Arch Insurance International:

As I mentioned at the start of our talk, obviously one of your roles as a motivational speaker and what I love, and in looking at some of the books that you've written as well, is this idea of, as we've touched upon earlier, encouraging people to always aim higher. I suppose sort of echoing the sort of encouragement that you had earlier in your career. Why do you think some people perhaps don't aim as high as they should?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Some of it is fear of failure. I failed a lot in my sports career, I lost a lot of races, I won some big important ones. I think some of it is confidence, resilience. My resilience goes up and down. People will say, "Oh, you're really thick skinned", I'm not always. I think it's about that honest conversation with yourself about, are you being the best you can be? And what else can you do? I have worked with some very talented younger athletes, and there was one I remember on the squad that was really struggling, and the team manager said have a chat with them, to get them to commit to the sport. And at the end of the chat, they decided to leave. This person didn't want to be in the sport, they were there because they felt they should, because of parental pressure, it wasn't their passion, and they're going to hate it. They were pulling some of the team apart, because they didn't care. So, I think for me, it comes back to that honest conversation. If you say you want to be the best in the world, are you doing all the things you need to do to be the best in the world? So, it's quite complicated those conversations, but it's not you train really hard, you win a medal. Because that's, that's the easy way to portray it. It's a lot more complicated than that, and I know loads of athletes who train incredibly hard and never win a medal.

Arch Insurance International:

I suppose there's a level of balance as well, when you're looking at setting these targets, as well it's

how high you are willing to aim? What is achievable, without pushing yourself too far? How do you go about establishing that balance as an individual?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Yeah, it's that time to evaluate. In the business environment, people are really busy. Everyone's got a billion things they're meant to be doing. Moving online has been fascinating, but I'm sure you're always thinking about the next thing you have to do and the next meeting. And so, even now I have time in the day, which is to stop and think and go, "okay". When I was an athlete, some of that was training time, training time just gets you away from everything. I think that personal time and really important for women to find time in the day to stop and think. Especially, I thought we'd moved on from this, but we haven't as much as we'd like, where a woman still has a lot of, say childcare responsibilities, we've not moved on to where I'd like to be, but I think it's finding time to reflect on yourself, and just to think about, "okay, what was good today? What wasn't great? What can I do better? What shouldn't I have done?". I get asked all the time about, is there anything I regret from my sports career? Well, not from competing, there's probably a few rows I shouldn't have had but you then have to own them and go, "Okay, maybe I shouldn't do that, why will I not do it again? Or why will I do it again, and just own it again?".

Arch Insurance International:

I suppose as well that period of reflection and having that time to reflect and to consider is also key to this idea of continuous improvement because if you're not going through that period of reflection and self-assessment, then you're not giving yourself the chance to maintain that continuous improvement.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Yeah. And I think again, everyone's busy with a million things. I think, being online, some of it's been amazing, because now the House of Lords has gone online. I mean, that's never a conversation we ever would have had in a building, an institution that hasn't really changed in 450 years, we've thrown everything out the window. Online has been amazing for lots of things, less traveling, but also, it's filled up our diaries in a different way and that reflection time has disappeared. I love technology, I have every bit tech going but I also have my book of lists, which is one of the most precious things in the world, as I'm clutching it to my chest. This is my to do list, it's also a bit of reflection. It's not a diary, but it's "okay, how do I plan?". Because again, you can work 20 hours a day on your computer, but it's not effective, and so I think a lot of that stuff that I've learned from sport is that you've got to think about your work life balance, you've got to think about what you eat, and you're sleep. And there are times where my work life balance is shocking and there's times when it's better, but you've got to even that out, because it's about how you can be effective, not how you can be present. It's really easy to be present but it's harder to be effective.

Arch Insurance International:

You come back to this idea of, this is a push every day, and it's this constant ability to push yourself and I suppose, there is that constant pursuit of being better, and trying to make that part of your everyday life. How do you look to build that into your everyday life, that ability to push yourself to set those targets slightly higher, without pushing yourself over the edge?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

It's harder now in the real world than it was in sport. Because in sport you've got this four year cycle, you've got Commonwealth Worlds, you've got all these things that are programmed in, you know, what's going to be next. Once you start that planning process, and then you figure out that for the next selection race, you've got 45 training sessions, that gives you a sense of urgency, which doesn't always happen in some of the stuff I do now. Also, coming from a sport where I was quite controlling

because I could be, going into politics, where there's so much that's above my paygrade in terms of the government manifesto, and the agenda and the timetabling, so you're dealing with a different set of things. For me, I have like 20 minutes a day, usually before I go to bed, where I just switch off and that's my time to think, "Okay, what's happening tomorrow?". I think I realized the importance of it, because it was so important when I was competing. And it's not easy to do that, but for me, it's the only way I can get through. And it's the only way I can do all the things that that I want to do. I think one of the hardest lessons I've ever learned is saying no to stuff. I'm really bad at saying no to stuff and then I find myself doing things I don't really want to do, because I didn't say no quickly.

Arch Insurance International:

Yeah, that ability to push back.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Yeah, I think it's also me living up to the things I tell other people to do, which is for me quite important, actually. But you learn all the time, don't you?

Arch Insurance International:

Absolutely, yes, every day is a learning experience. But as we were saying earlier, it's having that time to be able to reflect on that, to actually learn, to actively learn from it, rather than having an experience and then just having to move on from it.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

And I think some of that comes from, I live in the northeast, but now I work in London. So, one of the reasons for retirement was to spend more time with my family and not travel so much and then I end up in politics working 300 odd miles away from where my family live. So, I have this slightly split life in that I'm away from home four days a week. That was really hard with my daughter growing up. I felt guilty when I was home, guilty when I was away, just guilty and then I'd try not to feel guilty. Actually, having a conversation with her, she has a different perspective on it to the one that I have. The first lockdown for me was amazing because I got to spend time with my family that I've never spent before, for that period of time, and then then you listen to everyone else having a really miserable experience of lockdown. So, I think because of the way my work life goes, and we made a really conscious decision not to live in London, so that I had that separation for work, and I had that time to do the things and it's not perfect by any stretch, but when I'm home, I'm home and when I'm in London, I'm working.

Arch Insurance International:

I wanted to come back if I can to this theme of pursuing better together. For those in the business arena listening to this podcast today, what advice would you give to those people to help ensure that they can commit to that process of pursuing better together?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

I think the better together is so important because nobody does it on their own. I was in an individual sport but the only time I was really on my own was when I was competing. I didn't travel with an entourage, but you've got your coaches and your physios and nutritionists, and you've got your training partners. I think people assumed that I only trained with GB athletes, I trained with a whole range of people who brought different things to the training group, and I think it's recognising the differences and the strengths. I used to train with one guy who only really trained when the sun was shining, but he'd come to training sessions and he brought skills, so I think it's recognising the jigsaw of people. That's why diversity and inclusion is really important in terms of that jigsaw. For me, some of my training group now, they watch the parliament channel, I mean that is above and beyond anything you would ever ask a training partner to ever do. I mean, they mostly say things

like, "you should have brushed your hair" or, "your jacket was awful", but actually those things are important in terms of how you present, or they'll say, "the first two minutes, your speech was great, but it was a bit dull". So that's quite a trusted position for them to say that, but that's how you get better and improve. And I think it's having that critical friend, that someone you can talk to, that you can offload on. In a work environment, that's got to be quite carefully thought out and planned, but for me, I've still got those people in my life. In politics, you need a big network of people to do this, so it's kind of really similar. People think it's all really different, it's actually not. In sport you've got all this training time and then the races and the Paralympics was the pinnacle, the stuff I do now, you spend huge amounts of time meeting people, gathering evidence, reading briefing notes and writing speeches, for when you're in the chamber, you've got two minutes to take people with you. And I can only do that if I've got a network of people around me, who support me to do that final bit. So, I might be the person who is maybe winning the medal or making the speech that changes legislation, but I think it's really important to make sure you thank, and you support, and you reward, whatever way that is, the people who help you get there. And that's why the together stuff is so important, because the best leaders I've seen are the ones who aren't afraid to put really good people around them.

Arch Insurance International:

This is my final question and it's been a fascinating discussion, so thank you so much for that. You mentioned that togetherness and having that that team of people around you and that idea of collaboration, working together. Are there any other mainstays that have helped you personally to achieve what you have achieved? Any other traits in yourself or other aspects that you think have contributed, that have created that foundation that you've built on?

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Not being afraid to ask questions, I think is really important, and I think accepting that you may not get the answer that you'd like to hear. Was that good? When people ask that they usually want the answer to be yes, you are brilliant, and it's having that trusted relationship that someone can say, "yeah, it was really good, but you could have...". So it comes back to the sport, "yeah, you won a gold medal, but". And one of these moments, I remember, six months after my daughter was born, I was competing in Swiss nationals, and we had a plan for the 400 metres. The 400 metres is actually a really technical race, you don't quite go from the gun and just go as hard as you can and there's eight segments to it. And I remember my husband, who was my coach, I'd come off the track and I'd actually broke the world record, and he hadn't looked at the time and he was like, "Yeah, your first six pushes were a bit rubbish", and I was like, "yeah, do you see the time?" and he was like, "well, you weren't going for a time today", and he had the video and he showed me and I'm going "yeah okay, I'll take this on board". And then one of my training partners, Jason was like, "Yeah, but did you see the time?" and he was like "the time doesn't matter". He looked at the clock and just went, "Yeah, you could have gone quicker."

Arch Insurance International:

Wow, there's a lot of brutal honesty in that.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Yeah, but was he right? Well, yeah, probably, maybe. It's that stopping, re-evaluating and not being afraid to fail. It's really easy to say that because failure is miserable, and you don't always learn from failure. Sometimes you learn from winning. It's not this black and white sort of issue. But I think when it doesn't work, the people around you make a real difference to pull you back together to have another go.

Arch Insurance International:

Absolutely. Well, Tanni, it's been a thoroughly fascinating and enlightening conversation. I'm sure that listeners to the Arch Insurance Pursuing Better Together podcast will have gained so much from this conversation and a much greater understanding of what it means to commit to continuous improvement but also to that idea of looking to aim higher and how potentially you can aim higher. At this point, all there is for me to say is thank you so much on behalf of Arch Insurance for taking part and speaking to us today and providing such valuable insights.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson:

Thank you very much.