



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

You can subscribe through iTunes, Google Play, Stitcher or Spotify.

Robyn Benincasa: Lessons in Extreme Teamwork | July 31, 2022 | OAS Episode 167

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures, the people in them, the policies, process, and politics that shape them. I am your host, Ed Smith.

RB: *When you have an amazing team around you, it is so inspiring especially when they put you forward and say yes you may be the newest person on the team. Yes you may have less background or experience, but this is your moment.*

Ed: That was Robyn Benincasa, my guest on the podcast. Benincasa learned lessons on teamwork in one of the hardest places possible--taking part in extreme endurance races including several seasons on the reality TV show the “Eco Challenge,” a grueling 10-day team race. She has written a book “How Winning Works: 8 Essential Lessons from the Toughest Teams on Earth.” She will be sharing stories of the races and the lessons they taught her as a featured speaker at NCSL’s Legislative Summit in Denver on August 1st. She says the lessons are particularly pertinent to legislators and their staffs. Here is our discussion.

Robyn, welcome to the podcast.

RB: Glad to be here.

Ed: Let me start by asking you about these adventure races you’ve competed in. I’ve ran a couple dozen marathons, but those were a stroll in the park compared to these events. And I wonder if you could just describe what one of these Eco Challenge races entails.

RB: They are these crazy team based ultra-endurance events. Basically the race director will ask you to meet them in the most remote place on earth that they can find and they hand each team a set of maps and rules. And then the next morning or sometimes a couple of hours later, they say ready, set, go. We will see you guys in 600 to 1,000 miles.

Whichever team gets there first wins. You have four or five people on the team depending on the rules. So, kind of mixed gender teams also is a requirement, which is kind of interesting and fun. The clock never stops. So, if you sleep and when you sleep is all part of your team's strategy. And you are kind of doing all kinds of non-motorized transportation like kayaking, mountain biking, whitewater rafting, mountaineering. Basically, if one person on your team quits, your entire team is disqualified.

So, it really brought up this amazing teamwork that we had to be so good at to get all four or five of us across the finish line. You had to care about everybody on your team more so than you cared about yourself. And we also kind of created the concept of literally towing each other, carrying each other, moving weight around you know kind of different ways to create this amazing human synergy where we are better together than any individual could ever be alone. I did it for about 17 years and we spent a lot of that time at the top of our game, not just because we were amazing athletes, but because we were amazing teammates.

Ed: That is a very interesting difference from other endurance sports, which are often very solo enterprises. Where did the desire to take on these kinds of challenges come from? Were you a competitor from when you were a little kid?

RB: Yeah, from the time I was pretty young, I started gymnastics at eight. I've competed in tons of different sports from gymnastics to diving, track, cross country, Ironman triathlons, judo and then adventure racing. So, at each stage along the way, I was relatively competitive. But what I discovered was that I was really, really good at ultra, ultra-long things. Kind of in that idea of sticking with my strength. You know knowing what your strength is. I tried to be a fast runner. That didn't work out. I tried to do short triathlons. That didn't work out. So, I found out the longer the race was, the better I did personally. And also competitively compared to the rest of the field so I was kind of looking for something even longer and sillier than Ironman. I kind of came across adventure racing in Runner's World one day. The only person doing that sport at the moment, the only American team was led by Mark Burnett whose name you might recognize like from "Survivor" and every other crazy show. So back in the day, I found myself at Mark Burnett's house for a tryout to be the woman on his team to go to, you know, the big adventure race in Borneo that year. They took another woman and we ended up going as an all-female team of all the women that were left at the end of the tryout. And I was hooked. I mean I was instantly hooked. We were dead last in that race and I didn't even care. I was like, I have found the sport that I was meant to do. And so then it was kind of a quest to get on better and better teams and you know kind of find my tribe.

(TM): 05:03

Ed: It sounds as though you did that pretty successfully. You are going to speak at the opening general session of the Legislative Summit on Monday and what's the key message you want to share with these legislators and legislative staff and others concerned about state government?

RB: I mean I think its really important. I mean a lot of my message is going to be about the teambuilder and the teammate that we bring to the table every single day. Now whether it is a relationship that you are in for five minutes and maybe with one of your constituents or you are answering questions or a relationship you are in for a lifetime. You know your marriage. Your life. It's who you bring to the table as a teammate and teambuilder especially when you are serving people. You are serving the public. You are trying to make the world a better place. It is so important that you are a person that is able to connect and to create a "we" everywhere they go and in every interaction they have. So I'm going to share those essential elements that allow us to create this amazing human synergy where we are better together than any individual could ever be alone. And hopefully inspire people to build a truly world class team around them for the journey cause when you have crazy, huge iridaceous goals like all of them do for America and for the people that they serve, it's a lot like mountaineering. You are trying to get to the peak of the mountain and you are doing it every single day. And you are not doing it alone. It's important to you know to figuratively rope up to other people who have strengths and talents and skills and background and experience that you may not have because that's the way that you rise higher when you are connected to other people who have that same idea of how to build a world class team. So I'm going to share those essential elements of how we build a world class team.

Ed: I love the quote from you about not showing teammates how amazing you are, but how amazing they are. I'm sure that this is you've been asked about this before, but it's a great insight and I wonder if you can describe an experience that brought you to that insight?

RB: Well, when I started racing with the best team in the world. I actually got on the team because I asked them if I could have a tryout. I called them up. I don't know how I was – had that much guts to just call up the best team in the world and say hey, I want to race with you guys. They showed me kind of the power of believing in one another beyond reason. And the first time I raced with this amazing team that I was on in some form over the next gosh 15 years, we had to summit a 19,700-foot active volcano in Ecuador on day three of the race after no sleep for three entire days, running at over 14,000 feet and then we had to summit to 19,700 feet. We were all just a disaster. Just a total trainwreck. When we got to 18,000 feet, we were racing the you know the top French team of course which was kind of a theme throughout this my entire presentation. When we got to 18,000 feet, two of my teammates had to go back down the mountain because they had the beginnings of high-altitude pulmonary edema and the doctor told them that they needed to go back down. The race director said as long as you get three people to the top of this mountain, your team can continue. I had no idea I was capable of getting to the top of that mountain. I had 104 fever. My O2 sat was 71%. And I thought I was going to be one of the ones going back down at 18,000 feet and my teammate looked at me and said John and I have to go down. You've got this Rob. You have to go up. Just their 100% belief in me and my capabilities like literally changed my life that day. I went from being someone who was you know not confident, so afraid that I didn't belong. So afraid you know that I wasn't up to par with the rest of this team. Two of the best guys in the world were counting on me to get our team to the top of this mountain because three people had to get up there or we would be disqualified you know from first place to out of

the race. And so I learned from them kind of the power of believing in someone beyond reason.

And kind of figuratively where that idea came from as well of showing people how amazing they are is one of the videos I'm going to share in this conference which is ahm of a top Japanese team who had to carry a teammate up and over the highest mountain in Queensland after she ripped her Achilles tendon. And when they finish, they have her on their shoulders. You know it's like they just showed her. It was all about showing her how amazing she was, you know, to let them do it and to not quit the race. When you have an amazing team around you, it is so inspiring especially when they put you forward and say yes you may be the newest person on the team. Yes you may have less background or experience, but this is your moment. You know this is your time to shine and we are going to show you how amazing you are.

Ed: Wow. That's an extraordinary story. Let me ask you about your work as a firefighter. I was particularly struck by the fact that you had, I guess, run an all-female fire crew. I wondered from that experience if you see differences in how an all-female team works from how a mixed gender team works or is it pretty much the same just depending on personalities and that sort of thing?

RB: Yeah exactly. I mean really it's kind of about the same. You know if you have the right people on the team, it doesn't matter, male or female. But one fun thing about being on the all-female crew was that we didn't have to worry about asking stupid questions like that was kind of fun. Because sometimes you know if I were around other people I didn't know as well or people that I didn't feel totally comfortable with, I would have let them know that oh gosh I forgot how this tool works or how do I turn this thing on. But when I was with my girls, we could ask each other any stupid question that came across our minds and no one judged you for it. Like we would just laugh about it and we would help each other out. You know that was pretty fun to kind of have that support around you where you could really be your authentic self. You didn't have to pretend that you always had the ball.

Ed: I also wanted to ask you about Project Athena. Maybe you could talk a little bit about what that is and what you think people learn from setbacks.

(TM): 11:29

RB: Project Athena happened because I kind of had some medical setbacks. I've had several hip replacements after running out of cartilage over the years of doing all of this ultra-stuff. After my first hip replacement, I thought about, you know, what am I going to do next. And I realized, you know what, I'm not going to define myself by this setback. I'm going to define myself by the comeback that I create. I personally decided to be an ultra-distance paddler, you know, to focus on what I could do instead of what I couldn't do. And so I kind of picked up another brand-new sport because I was off and on crutches for, don't even get me started. I've had six hip replacements. I was on crutches off and on for a long time, but I could paddle a boat. So, I was like wait, wait a minute. What if I could do this for other people, you know, help them turn their own setbacks into comebacks. So, the idea of Project Athena came to me one day, and so we help

survivors of medical or traumatic setbacks live an adventurous dream as part of their recovery. And it's about showing them how strong and amazing they are after a big setback in their life. And so, we take survivors, women and men now. Instead of Athena, we just call the men that we take Zeus and we train them for four or five months before it so we are not just taking them off the couch, and we take them on endurance adventures, like hiking all the way across the Grand Canyon in one day and back the next. So, we do rim to rim to rim in two days. We do the Zion Traverse, which is 45 miles all the way across Zion National Park.

I created an adventure called the Keys to Recovery where we kayak and ride bikes from Key Largo to Key West over three days. I'm creating a Sedona ultra-hike as well for next year, but it's the most amazing thing in the world to see a survivor who kind of left home as the family's sick person, you know, to come on one of our adventures or the family's injured person or the person that their family was always worried about for the last however long. And when they go home after these adventures, they are the family's badass endurance athlete and it just completely changes their family's perspective on them and their whole idea of themselves, you know, and what they are capable of. And it just completely changes their lives.

Ed: You are speaking, of course, next week to lawmakers and legislative staffers and others and I'm wondering how your experience particularly working with teams and building resilience can translate into what these folks do every day.

RB: Oh gosh. What these folks are doing every day all day is building connections. You know building teams, serving people, having that higher sense of purpose. I can't think of a better group to actually share this with because yes they are bringing their life background. They are bringing their experience. They are bringing their motivation and their inspiration, but to get all of the people that they serve in their life you know to get all of us across the finish line, they have to build an amazing team around them. And my mission is to give them the tools and even more inspiration you know to continue to do that. Like you know how can I bring the best teammate and the best teambuilder you know to bear for the success of everybody that I serve. And so hopefully people will really leave you know all fired up to be the kind of leader and the kind of teammate that they see in my presentation. To do even more of what they do so well right now which is gather groups of amazing people together for this incredible cause of ensuring the success of everyone that they serve.

Ed: As we get ready to wrap up, I want to ask you about these extreme challenges you've been attracted to and obviously they are not for all of us, but I wonder if there is something that you've learned in some of these extreme experiences that you think the rest of us can learn from even if we can't go necessarily and experience it ourselves?

RB: I don't think anyone should do an adventure race. That's why I'm here. I can distill the essence of it down and give it to people without having to actually go through the jungle covered with leeches or you know experience eight to ten days of craziness that is incredibly hard to recover from. But you know the things that we learned were really all about kind of that grit and resilience and innovation and teamwork. Realizing that you can do things you would never do alone. You know you can do things you would never

accomplish alone if you've built an amazing team around you. I will never have gotten to the finish line of any of these races without my teammates. What I learned is don't just have smaller goals you know have bigger, huger hair audacious goals and build a team to help you get there. And you know and that's what I hope everyone of these legislators and staff members is going to do.

Ed: Well that is a great note to close on Robyn and I thank you so much.

RB: Thank you.

Ed: And that concludes this episode of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate NCSL podcasts on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Pocket Casts, Stitcher or Spotify. We also encourage you to check out our other podcasts: "Legislatures: The Inside Storey" and the special series "Building Democracy." Thanks for listening.

(TM): 17:13