

Santa Ono: Broadcasting from the university of British Columbia, where walkers and dogs enjoy Pacific spirit regional park. This is *Blue and Goldcast*. Broadcasting from the university of British Columbia. This is *Blue and Goldcast*. I'm Santa Ono, the president and vice chancellor of UBC. On this season of the *Blue and Goldcast*, I'm speaking with the people who are leading some of the most innovative and creative work coming out of our campuses.

Today my guests are two athletes who went from UBC's programs all the way to the Olympics. Hillary Janssens is a rower who represented Canada at the 2020 summer Olympics and won bronze in women's pairs. Evan Dunfee is a race walker who won the bronze for Canada in the men's 50 kilometre race walk at the 2020 summer games.

Hillary, Evan, welcome to *Blue and Goldcast*. Thank you for being on the show. Hillary, can you tell us how you started out with rowing in the very first place from the very beginning?

Hillary Janssens: Well, I was attending UBC in my first year and actually on Imagine Day, which is the orientation for first years. I got approached by two people on the field when I was meeting in my mug group, my undergraduate group. They asked me right away if I had ever tried rowing and if I'd be interested in it. I had never touched an oar. I had never really thought about doing the sport, but I'm 6'2" and I played basketball and volleyball in high school. I knew I was going to miss being part of a team. The one message that I was receiving from basically everyone at university was it doesn't matter what it is, but try to get involved and try to get a sense of community within the community because it's such a large school.

I went to the info meeting and it went from there. I developed quickly in the sport and made the varsity team and then made the Canadian team, the under 23 team. Since then I've been to two Olympics and it's all because the rowing team just spotted me out of the crowd on the campus at UBC. I said yes, and gave it my best effort.

Santa: That's an amazing story. I know some people, I think it's a team called thunder, which are essentially high school kids that are rowing. Is that correct? They row at the boat house there as well.

Hillary: Yes, the UBC boathouse, we share it with the university St. George's high school and Thunderbird rowing club, which is open to the community. There's lots of opportunities to try rowing. It's a wonderful sport, regardless of what level you're trying to compete at. Or if it's just recreational, it's a beautiful sport and a beautiful way to spend time outdoors and get some exercise in.

Santa: Evan. What about you? Were you a race walker from day one in high school? Or is this something that you picked up after enrolling at UBC?

Evan Dunfee: I started race-walking when I was 10-years-old. I was the shortest kid in the class, the red curly hair, the big thick glasses. I love sport, but I wasn't very good at anything. I was born five weeks early and my motor skills are pretty delayed. You combine that with the big thick glasses. I was taking a lot of basketballs, volleyballs, you name it to the face and breaking a lot of glasses. I was desperate to

find a sport that I could be good at and prove myself to my classmates and all that stuff.

My elementary school started a popsicle stick run. Run a lap on the field at lunch, you get a Popsicle stick, you turn in all your Popsicle sticks at the end of lunch. Your teacher records your progress and you work towards running 100 or 200 K throughout the year. I thought this was cool. There's no balls that hit me in the face. I'll give it a try. Sure enough, that first day I got hooked on it.

I was the only kid that could run the entire lunch hour without stopping to walk. I thought, "Oh wow, okay. My energizer bunny tendencies are paying off finally." Just kept coming out every day and that second week ran a lap further than I had run the previous week. I was just so enamored by this idea of my input equaled my outfit. It was so easy to see the progress that I'd made and it was so objective. It wasn't like playing team sports where I couldn't show how hard I was working because no one would pass me the ball. All of a sudden it was all me and I love that.

I joined a track club and my older brother joined track club as well. A year later he was in Grade eight and he had his appendix taken out. While his stitches were healing, running was a little bit painful. His high school coach was like, "Hey, there's this thing called race walking. I don't really know anything about it, but maybe it won't tug on your stomach so much and you can stay fit and then come back to running when your stitches heal." He tried that and finished third, I think, in his first race, probably only four kids in the race, but he got a medal. As the younger brother, I was like, "Well, if he can do it, it's got to be pretty easy." Went to my first race. I ended up winning my first race and I was just completely hooked on it. Basically from there, I was like, "Yes, I want to go to the Olympics. I want to be a race walker. I really didn't look back."

Santa: That's amazing. You wanted to go to the Olympics relatively early in your career as a race walker.

Evan: Yes. My dad coached in Munich in 1972 in swimming. I grew just hearing about the Olympics. I didn't really know what it was, but it sounded cool. It sounded normal. It wasn't put up on this pedestal. It was just a thing that, "Hey, if this is a thing you like, and you want to do, sure, why not?" I had the privilege to be afforded all the opportunities that I wanted to try to achieve that goal. It just was natural.

Grade three, I had that assignment, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I wrote that I wanted to go to the Olympics and my teacher said, "Yes, that's great. Do you want to add anything else?" I was like, "No, I'm good. This is it." It was very early on, but for those first number of years I was doing it because I wanted to prove myself to others. I was bullied a little bit, picked on a little bit and I thought sport would be the way to prove myself.

It wasn't until I got to UBC and missed out on the Olympics in 2012. It expanded my worldview through university that I realized how detrimental that mindset was and how I needed to focus more on the process and focus on myself rather than doing it for other people. That was a big transformation and really started me on this journey where sport allowed me to grow and to do all the amazing things it's allowed me to do since.

Santa: Now, both of you were student athletes during your time at UBC. Can you just, I'll start with you, Hillary, share just some of your memories of your time as a Thunderbird.

Hillary: Oh, I have so many amazing memories of being a T-Bird. First and foremost is like you said, the volume of training compared to racing is quite high in rowing. A normal week would have 12 workouts in it, two workouts a day for six days a week and two or three weekdays, we'd be out at the boathouse in Richmond at 5:20 in the morning. Those days would be pretty hard when you're sitting in class and wishing you had a nap but and often on weekends we'd race at university championships and other regattas.

I had so many great times traveling with my teammates and racing and we love to compete. We had a pretty successful varsity eight during my time there. It was so special to be able to be a T-Bird and race as a T-Bird and just walk around campus and feel the community of not just the rowing team, but the whole varsity athlete population. It was very special.

Santa: Thanks, Hillary. How about you Evan, tell me a little bit about what it was like for you to be a student athlete at UBC.

Evan: My time at UBC was transformational in a lot of ways for me. I honestly should not have gotten into UBC, academically I wasn't a good student. I got incredibly lucky at that. I was able to get in part because of my ability to walk fast and I felt this huge responsibility once I got there to again, prove myself that I belonged there. The first couple of years were just spent working my butt off to catch up and to get where I felt I needed to be academically. I was quite introverted and our race walking contingent was quite small.

I never actually gave myself the opportunity to embrace the wider Thunderbird athletic culture and steered away from a lot of those things due to the sense that I didn't belong there or

I didn't have the confidence to put myself out there. Looking back on it, I feel like I missed a lot of these opportunities because I had just convinced myself that they weren't for me. I listened to some Hillary stories and like, "Ah, I wish I had done more. I wish I had done some of the stuff and got myself out of my bubble a little bit more." By the time I graduated I was just starting. I had just gotten myself to that point and all this new found confidence and academically I was excelling and I had this huge new passion for-- I did my degree in kinesiology and just this huge new passion for how the body works and this newly found inquisitive mindset. That really carried me through the next several years of my life, including up to the Rio Olympics. Just being able to find a new way to train, to find a new way to derive happiness through this kind of, "All right, I now know how the human body works. How good can I be? What can I make my body do? What is my potential?"

Just finding this huge new passion for pushing myself and finding joy in the process of chasing after those goals. Not just like, "Oh, I won, I'm happy or I lost, I'm sad." It was like, "Oh, like this process towards getting to these goals is so rewarding and so fulfilling." I think my time at UBC was instrumental into helping adopt that mindset.

Santa: I wanted to ask you both a question. Tell me about the actual races. What were they like? What do they feel like? They're pretty dramatic. Can we start with you, Hillary? What was it like?

Hillary: Yes. First of all, it had been almost two years since we had raced. It had been so long since we had seen our international competitors. The people we think about when we're in the depths of training, the people that we picture racing besides it was so fun to be there finally and you could just tell everyone was so excited and so grateful that the Olympics were happening. The racing was very exciting.

We had a really good heat that went according to plan. The semifinal was a bit of a crazy day. It was a really fast tailwind. I think we could have done that race a little better, but we came third and that's what you needed to get into the A final. The day of the final, we knew we had some things to correct from the semifinal. We also knew that we just wanted to be proud of our performance and let all the work that we had put in, let it pay off because we did work very hard. The rowing races are about seven minutes long, but I can only ever remember like two or three little thoughts that I have in.

I don't know if, Evan, you get this while you're racing, but afterwards you look back on the race and you're like, "I remember probably 10 seconds of the whole thing." We had a really good start and we knew crossing the halfway mark that we were in front, but we also knew that other boats would keep pushing. That last 500 meters we were just holding on and hoping it was enough. We crossed the line, we knew we had a medal and it was just so special.

My partner and I, we had been through a lot in terms of injury in the last year. It was just so special to finish our journey on the Olympic podium and couldn't have asked for a better result. It was just so special to be racing again. I wish we had done more racing because it's really the fun part of sport.

Santa: Now, tell me about-- What did you remember. You remember this story, and at the end, did you actually know how well you did or did you just give it your all and you were just a mixture of exhaustion and relief. What did you feel at that moment?

Hillary: A lot of relief. I knew we were not first, but either second or third, we were in and outside lanes. I couldn't really see very much, but I knew that we'd have to give it 100% to have a shot at the podium. We were in our interviews right after, we were crying a little bit just because it was so emotional, so much relief, so much joy that this thing that we had just waited so long and worked so hard for that we made it happen.

I was just thinking about my family watching at home and how proud they would be and all of Canadians, just because being at the Olympics, you just get excited when you see another Canadian athlete win a medal. It was really special to be able to contribute that. It was an amazing experience.

Santa: Now, Evan, a lot of people were watching your race and I was approached by a number of people say, "Did you see Evan?" Tell me about the race and especially the dramatic finish.

Evan: It's really hard to make 50 Ks come down to these exciting finishes, but I seem to have a knack for it. I'm sure my parents would have appreciated me to have made that move a little bit earlier. As Hillary said, it was just going into the race after so long. It was so rewarding thinking about where I was 10 years ago and what the pandemic would have done for me. I was the kind of athlete who I needed competition. I needed those wins. I needed those things to fill my happiness meter. It was so fleeting because as soon as I won a race, I'd be happy and then immediately look to the next thing. It would just completely wane.

I think back to Rio as well, where I'd gotten this different mentality, where I was now like enjoying the process and I was able to derive happiness and success through chasing after that big goal. That was such a big improvement, but I was still doing it for me. I was still doing it to see how good I could be. Then when the pandemic hit, I found myself in this amazing place in my life where I was so happy to be chasing after the process. I was so happy to be putting in the work day in and day out. It didn't feel like I was doing it just for myself.

In January of 2021, not being able to be in Australia training in the summer with all my friends and teammates. Motivation was a little bit tough and we did a little fundraiser for kids sport, where I asked people to help me get through my 600 kilometers of training and try to raise \$6,000. The community came together and we raised \$8,500 for kids sport just through me training and that idea of it was bigger than me now. I wasn't doing this for myself anymore. I had this whole community around me and I could use my platform to help others was so motivating.

Heading into the race in Sapporo, we raced up north from Tokyo, but I was just in this amazing place where I was so excited to race, so excited to get on that start line and do this thing for me but also for all the people that were watching back home. Like Hillary said, just thinking of family and friends. That race started. I wasn't great. My hamstring was bugging me a little bit. I wasn't able to do what I thought I was capable of doing and I kept asking my body for just a little bit more, just a little bit more. It kept being like, "No, no."

With a kilometer to go, I found myself in fourth place. I was 22 seconds back of the athlete in third and just stubbornly asked my body one more time. Would we have another gear? This time, for whatever reason, it gave me that next gear. I was able to up the pace and I could see that that athlete was struggling and we were still running out of time and came around that corner and you could see the finish line.

I still had probably six or seven seconds to make up and was just thinking, "Well, even if I don't get there, like I'm going to leave nothing on the table. I'm going to have no regrets," and moved into third place with about 100 meters to go and came across that finish line. Just let out this like giant roar of just exuberance of just like, it was just a release. I think relief was such a good word because that's how I felt in that moment of just like this relief of like, "Oh, boy." Everything I've dreamed of for the last 21 years, this thing that I've been so focused on, I've done it and there's just this like sense of calm and then getting the medal.

We got our medal the next day. I always thought about what that would feel like putting that metal around my neck. What was that going to feel like? I used to think, "Oh, I'm going to think back to all the training I did or I'm going to think back to the

kids who told me I couldn't do it," I had no idea. Then as soon as I got that medal, the first thought that washed over my head was, "Wow. I'm going to be able to use this to do so much good in my community."

It was so cool because that day Kraft Dinner announced they were donating 35,000 boxes of Kraft Dinner to my local food bank in my name. We sold off special boxes, my face on it to fundraise for kids sport and raised \$20,000 for kids sports. Being able to use that medal as a platform to do good in my community was greater than any sense I ever thought I would get from doing it for myself.

Santa: What would you like to say to current UBC student athletes and you know many of them personally that are trying to follow in your footsteps, what would you say to them? Hillary, can we start with you?

Hillary: Enjoy it. It's such a special time, such a somewhat stressful and activity filled time to be a student athlete at UBC, but just rely on your teammates and appreciate that you're all going through similar things, if not the same things. It's a such a unique environment to be in and to be amongst so many driven people, whether they're driven more academically or more athletically. The resources are there to help you but the number one resource is probably your teammates and knowing that everything that you're facing they're facing too, and the rewards are very well worth it so keep going. You never know where it'll take you.

Santa: Thanks, Hillary. How about you, Evan? What's your message to those who follow you?

Evan: Pretty simply, just dream really big, set really big goals. Find yourself a community, which is easy at UBC that is like-minded, that is chasing after really big things as well, and feed off each other and chase that goal. Chase that passion with just exuberance and measure your success by how far you've come, not by whether or not you got to that end point or not. Every step you take towards that goal is success, is growth and just embrace that.

At a certain point, take what you've learned from chasing that passion and use it to help others because you're going to have a unique set of skills and you're going to be able to find ways to use those skills to help others. Mine was being able to walk fast, being able to walk fast for long periods of time and use that to make a difference in my community was wild to me, but we found a way to do it. Whatever you're passionate about. Just chase that with exuberance.

Santa: Well, thank you very much, Evan. The last question I have for you is this, you're both very young people, have you thought about your future? What's up for you next? Let me start with you, Hillary.

Hillary: I've applied to a few med schools. UBC is one of my top choice. I was always interested in medicine. I've always wanted to be a doctor, but when the pandemic hit, that was a really rough time personally because society was in such great need and I was so unessential [chuckles]. I can't wait to go back to school and help others in a tangible way and be involved in the community and use what I've learned through rowing, all the soft skills that you learn from being an athlete and a

student athlete. They're very valuable. I can't wait to hit the book and start learning something else.

Santa: Do you know what kind of doctor you want to be?

Hillary: I have no idea. [chuckles] I also approached my undergrad in a similar way in that you never know what opportunities will open themselves up to you and what you'll find yourself wanting to learn more about. I'm open to anything.

Santa: That's wonderful. Evan, how about you? What's next for you?

Evan: Giving myself one more year of just chasing after athletic success and our world championships next year are in Eugene, Oregon. Not being able to have family and friends in Tokyo was the right decision, obviously but it was still a hard decision. Having a world champ so close to home, I just can't pass up that opportunity to get a busload of my closest friends down there to cheer me on. That's the immediate future and just trying to use this medal to create opportunities and help my community. Getting some school talks, going to talk to kids and share my story.

Then the pandemic opened my eyes to municipal politics. I started watching my local Richmond city council meetings on YouTube and got enthralled by that. Thinking about maybe running for city council next year and using my unique view of the city of someone who's walked around it more than anybody else to make our community a more active and healthy and happy place. We'll see.

Santa: I just want to thank both of you for your time. You make us very, very proud. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to join us on *The Blue and Goldcast*.

Hillary: Thank you so much, Dr. Ono, this has been a pleasure.

Evan: It was so much fun to be here.

Santa: Hillary Janssens and Evan Dunfee. Thanks so much for being on *Blue and Goldcast* today. Hillary Janssens is a professional rower and Olympian. Evan Dunfee is a professional race walker, Olympian and speaker.

That does it for this episode. You can find links to our guest work as well as previous editions of the show at blueandgoldcast.com. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app like Apple podcasts, SoundCloud or Stitcher. You can tweet at me @ubcpres, that's press with a Z. I'm Santa Ono. Thank you for listening.