

Santa: 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 guest is a student-athlete who had to overcome adversity from an early age. Coltyn Liu was just two years old, but an accident left him with a number of challenges, including a brain injury. He was able to not only live with his conditions but thrive despite them.

Today, Coltyn is a star volleyball player and UBC student with a very bright future ahead of him. Coltyn, welcome to *Blue and Goldcast*. Thanks so much for coming to the show. To start off, I'd like to hear a bit about your story. How did you come to study at UBC?

Coltyn Lui: UBC, for me, was a bit of a dream come true. I wasn't really expecting to study in a post-secondary school in early high school because like my first time in full-time school was in Grade 11. I was homeschooled for the majority of elementary school and I did part-time in early high school. I wanted to pursue kin because not only for sports, but I spent a lot of time in Allan McGavin and Scott Fraser down in physio, all of high school.

For that, that just clicked and I wanted to join the kinesiology and I knew UBC had a great kinesiology program. Just being around UBC, both going to games again, being at Allan McGavin, playing different tournaments at War Memorial. That's how I came to be a UBC.

Santa: Well, I going to tell you that my daughter, I'm very proud that my daughter who's in Grade 12 was accepted into UBC Kinesiology and you're being--

Coltyn: Congratulations.

Santa: Thank you. You're being humble because you just learned about a month ago that UBC Kin has ranked number one in North America again, but number three in the world. I don't know how many people know how awesome the kinesiology program at UBC is.

Coltyn: Yes, it's really great.

Santa: We're really glad that you chose UBC, not only because of the education you're receiving but also because you are an outstanding volleyball player. I just wanted to ask you a question. Can you share a bit about your athletics history? How did you become a world-class volleyball player? It doesn't happen overnight when you were a kid, right? It took a lot of training, I would think. Tell me first about that and then tell me how you chose UBC for volleyball over all the other volleyball teams in Canada and also around the world. Tell us a bit about your athletic history.

Coltyn: All right. It's a loaded question. For me, I actually started out playing soccer. That was my main sport that I really enjoyed. When I was younger, I guess even before I played soccer, I used to do a lot of different therapies for a brain injury that occurred. My mom tried to find essentially different ways to, I guess, normalize therapy and so that route was sports. We started with soccer. I like soccer, but both

my mom and sister played volleyball. I was in the gym, I guess, playing around with them, getting exposed to different games and tournaments.

Just being really involved in volleyball. I think in Grade 5 and 6, I did some camps. Then, in Grade 7, I played my first year of club volleyball for Apex Volleyball Club. Ken Lee, who is a former assistant coach at UBC was my coach for that club team. It was really great being exposed to a high-level coach so young and he really pushed me to improve, get better. I was really small when I first started.

Yes, there's a lot of people who say, "Oh, you can't play volleyball if you're small," but he just got me to develop a bunch of different skills, and eventually, I got better at those skills and then I did grow. It was accumulation of a bunch of different factors, how I progressed this sport again in Grade 7 when I played my first-year club. Ken Lee pushed me to play on the BC Summer Games team. I was two years older actually. I got exposed to high-level coaching and high level performance at that age.

With that, volleyball came to replace these therapies that I had to do as the natural form. Got me moving, got my body red essentially. Then, in Grade 9, I played my first year of provincial team so Team BC. I think I was 15 or 14 or whatever however old you are in Grade 9. I played for the 17 team, the Grade 11 team. Getting to represent my province was the first taste of high high level. I played BC Summer Games before that, but provincial team is the next step up.

I realized that maybe I could start to play at a high level and maybe go far with that. Then, just throughout high school, I continued to play on the provincial team. I eventually chose volleyball over soccer. I like both but volleyball is, I guess, by my sense of belonging, I felt that I could excel the most. Then, Grade 11, I got chosen for-- maybe it was Grade 10 or one of those years, I got chosen for my first youth national team experience where they chose the best players from the provincial team or different provincial teams around Canada and then held a camp for all of them.

I did that. Yes, I got to play in Canada Games in Grade 12, we got a bronze medal there so that was awesome. When it came to choosing my university, it was actually a very difficult choice. I had try to be humble. I had to quit a few offers, but I think what it came down to is the fact that I knew how exposed I was to UBC, like how I was around UBC from when I first started volleyball and having Ken Lee as my coach, and then having Richard Schick, who is the former head coach of UBC.

He actually brought me shoes in Grade 8 because Grade 8 to Grade 9 is when I went through like a pretty big growth spurt. My mom couldn't really keep up with my growing shoe size. I got to 13, 14 by the time I was 15. He brought me shoes and just that early exposure plus the world-class kinesiology program was definitely a go-ahead for me.

Santa: That's really quite an achievement in and of itself. It's interesting because a lot of the things you're saying are what's happened. We've experienced in my family because my daughter is also a soccer player as well. She did both, all the way up until Grade 12 so I have an idea, a little bit of a glimpse into your career in high school because I've been to these provincial tournaments, I've been to Velodrome, that's now home to BC volleyball. I know what it's like all of that, the training, traveling in different cities, and competing at the highest level.

I just have an enormous amount of respect for you being able to do that, but also to do that at the university level and also at the national level and to still also do your studies. That must have been pretty hard, right? To compete at that level, but also make time to excel in a very rigorous world-ranked program. What was that like?

Coltyn: Yes, definitely for first couple of years at UBC, I did struggle as a very intense program with a lot of the mandatory courses that I had to take. It was honestly a lot of fun. Now that I'm done my degree, I look back and I definitely enjoyed my entire experience in kinesiology. It was interesting too because, in high school, I was very mathematics and physics-based. That was where my passion was. I didn't even take biology in high school. When I went into my first year, a lot of it was like Biology 12 based and I had a bit of a steep learning curve to get over.

I think once I got over that, I started really enjoying it. Then, later into my undergrad, I started taking the more difficult classes that I thought I wouldn't be taking in my first couple of years. I took pulmonary physiology, neuroscience, and a bunch of the other more difficult classes in kin that I tend-- to the first couple of years, I probably wouldn't have taken them, but as I got through it, I started to gain more and more of a passion for kin. I aimed for those more difficult classes that I wanted to take. I always made studying a big priority.

I guess that's for most student-athletes going to have to be able to time manage, but for me, yes, time management was the biggest stepping stone that took me from struggling, not struggling to get by because I always had fairly good grades, but it was more like, I don't know, maybe getting assignments in the day before. Whereas now with time management, everything just got better and I got a lot less stressed the past couple of years, which has nice.

Santa: Let me ask you this question. I don't think people who haven't been in your shoes doing both understand how hard it is, the time management, because you're doing two jobs. It's tough enough to be a UBC student, but to be a UBC student and also to compete on a national level and all of that it entails is really two jobs. When I talked to athletes, some of them are Olympians and I asked them, did you think it made it harder for you to have to do both?

Some of them actually said that it was refreshing, it's refreshing to get out of the classroom or the laboratory and to do something which is physical fitness to compete at the highest level. That difference for you, for your psyche, for your brain, to going from studying textbooks to actually using your body playing at the highest level, that going back and forth is actually good for your wellness, and actually helps you focus on your studies. Is that true for you or was it two jobs?

Coltyn: Honestly, a little bit of both. I fully agree that the sporting helped to balance things. I think, for me, specifically, I don't know how, I guess, academically inclined I would've been if I wasn't playing sports. I think sports has really helped me to learn lifelong lessons, the time management piece and whatnot. For me, I try to be elite and everything, not just sports so if you're going to be elite on the court, you also have to be elite in a classroom.

I think learning this high-performance mindset that all athletes need, I think directly translates to the classroom as well. The two go hand in hand. Although it can be

difficult with planning everything. I think I definitely wouldn't have traded the extra couple of hours for studying that I got playing the sport. You know what I mean?

Santa: Yes, I completely understand but it can be a little bit much if you have papers and exams and you're on the road. If you're not in a right focused state of mind, the whole team can lose a whole set of points just like that. When you say that there's a lot of focus and concentration that's required, and if you have a looming examination or paper, that's not the easiest thing to deal with. Wouldn't that be the case?

Coltyn: Yes, I think that definitely could be the case. I know what I try to do and I know what Michael Hawkins tries to foster out. My whole team talks about this. It is just leaving everything that's going on outside of life at the door. When you enter the gym, you're there in the present moment. One of my old friends actually had a saying on like the inside of the shoe, I think it said put on, leave off. It's like when you put on your shoes, you leave everything off the court.

Although finals and exams can be really stressful. It's when you're at practice or lift for those two hours, you have to be present, you can't let those external factors lean over you or else, you'll just be unfocused in practice and the same goes for school. If you're thinking about an upcoming playoff match and you're trying to study for exam, you're probably not going to do as well you're not going to be as focused so I think trying to compartmentalize the different aspects of life is really key. I think as a student-athlete, that's one of the biggest lessons that you'll learn.

Santa: Well, thank you so much for that. Now you've alluded to, when you were younger that your mother was managing a condition that you had. You had obstacles and you had to overcome those in your sports journey, but also your life journey to the extent that you're comfortable talking about it. Can you just tell us a little bit about what happened to you and what you had to get over your childhood years to get to where you are today?

Coltyn: It is a pretty long story. My mom does a better job at explaining it than I do, but in a nutshell, essentially, I was at a shopping mall for-- I think, it was my second birthday. One of the vendors came through at the food court that was actually not allowed, but yes, I think they tried to avoid him, another kid, and they hit me. I ended up with a pretty traumatic brain injury that essentially maybe have to learn how to walk and talk again. With that, it didn't ever think that I'd even be in school, let alone university.

Like I said before, I went through years-long in intensive therapy. I've touched on it before, but the sports is what took over the therapy side. For those couple of years, or for that long period of years that I was doing the therapy, I was doing physiotherapy, occupational therapy, all of the above, different hearing things, vision therapy, essentially, every therapy that you can think of. Yes, it was definitely really difficult, but at the same time, I didn't really think that that was that unique because, for me, I was just living life.

I didn't really know what was considered normal or what, I guess, other kids had to go. For me, I never really looked at it as that I was going through tough things. I was just like, "Okay, I have physio today. I have to go to the swimming pool and do these things today." For me, it was just a unique situation because again, I was just going

along with life. You know what I mean? I wasn't overthinking. With that being said, I also had a lot of different doctor's appointments as that happens.

With the doctor's appointments, my mom would often book two different appointments because one would be for me, just like a check-in and the second would be to actually discuss with my mom what was going on and I would actually leave the room for that component because yes, my mom didn't want me constantly having to hear about these difficulties and whatnot or what I could or couldn't do, per se. She didn't want me to have any limitations or boundaries.

I think that was really important because when you focus on the positives or things in your control, I think that gives you the best situation to be able to overcome things and not dwelling on, I guess, the other things. Just learning how to, I guess, believe in yourself was a big part for me. I know, even when I was younger, I used to wear a walking brace and I definitely knew that that wasn't typical of most kids that I wear a walking brace because my walking gate was a bit unique.

Yes, it was a bit of a double-edged sword in that I knew that I was going to physio, but again, I didn't know that that was that atypical. I was just happy being in the car with my mom, driving to the swimming pool, or driving to physiotherapy. I guess as I've gone older, one thing that I've looked into/started to follow is this stoic principle of *amor fati*, which means love of one's fate.

That just means you're given a situation and you can either dwell on it or embrace it, and look for the positives to see how you can level up and with threat of going on a bit of a tangent. Again, I'd be doing a little bit of research on this concept of eternal recurrence, and I'm paraphrasing here, but it talks about how-- if the devil was to show up, and tell you that you had to live your life over and over again for eternity, would that be the worst thing that you could imagine?

For some people, probably, but if you live your life with this principle of *amor fati* or love of your fate, then that's not the worst thing that you could imagine. You know what I mean? Because you love your life and so that's what I'm trying to live by now.

Santa: Got it. That's pretty. I look into that myself. I didn't know much about that, but thank you for that and you talked about your mom a lot. One of the things I want to ask you is clearly your mom was instrumental pivotal in you're getting all this therapy and all the challenges that lay before you. Is there anybody else that was key?

Coltyn: Oh, man. I definitely don't want to list because I'm definitely going to forget people, but yes, a ton of people like my sister. We don't have a huge family, but we have a big extended family. I guess if you listen to this, you know who you are. Again, I don't want to list everyone just because just to make sure I don't forget people, but yes, different coaches, extended family, my sister.

Santa: Listening to you now, you've really thought through how to get through difficult times but when you were very young, you had to have a support network. It's really clear and I'm really glad that you did. One thing I've always loved about volleyball is that, whether you win the point or not, and especially at UBC but I've noticed because I actually follow my daughter that whether you win or not,

everybody converges in the center of the half-court you're playing on as if you're celebrating whether you win or lose.

Tell me a little bit about that. Is that part of volleyball culture? Because it doesn't happen in basketball. You miss a shot, you don't all cheer as if this was something good that happened. You usually are down. In volleyball, you guys especially the UBC Thunderbirds Volleyball Team, and I've watched a lot of your games, by the way, the first time I watched is that they're celebrating and they just lost a couple of points. What is that? Is that part of the psychology of keeping upbeat even if you have lost a couple of points?

Coltyn: Yes. As you alluded to me before, volleyball is a very big mental sport, one of the biggest mental base sports I can probably think of. Not all teams do this, but you'll definitely see the majority of teams do it. Everyone has their own different version of it but for the Thunderbirds, specifically, that was a really key focus point on us. No matter how the game was going if we lost or won a point, we would come together. If we won the point, it would normally be a celebration but it would be like, "Okay, what is next?"

We'd all have one or two things or one or two quick things to say a word or not. We just focus on the next play or what happened during that play. Say if we lost the point, maybe someone got blocked, we come in, and be like, "He dove in across on you and that's why you got blocked. That's right, now we can get the next one." It's more of like a mental reset because, in volleyball, the average men's rally lasts I think something like six seconds, so it's really short.

It's really important that between points, you reset so that you don't dwell on past mistakes because again, that's in the past, you can't focus on that. What's important is getting to the next point. When we all come together, it brings about some camaraderie and brotherhood as well as resetting for the next point. Yes, that was definitely a huge focal point for us, especially this year was just resetting and taking the time to talk to each other in between points.

Santa: You've talked a little bit about your development as an athlete and I know that some of the Thunderbirds actually have coached kids that I know and my daughter. What advice would you give to them as they're studying out with a club or they're competing for Thunder or Air Attack or whatever, and then they don't get selected the first year? What advice would you give younger athletes that want to be like you that are facing challenges? Maybe they're not growing fast enough, they weren't selected by the club team that everybody wants to be on in terms of achieving their dream.

Coltyn: The two biggest pieces of advice, I think one, develop your mental game. As I've touched, this is a huge mental aspect, mental sport so you can get really strong in your mental game. There's a really common error that happens especially as kids start out. As errors build up, you can mentally check out the game. It happens at our level too but more for the younger age group. As errors build up or maybe things don't go your way, you can check out or get a bit disassociated.

Focus on your mental game and if things aren't going your way, vocalize because the best way to get out of a bit of a mental drought or a performance drought is to

vocalize to your teammate and to give energy instead of taking away so that will always keep you in the game. The second part, more skill-based is to develop a well-rounded game. You can't just focus on going up and being the biggest attacker, you can't succeed at the next level as a big attacker if you're not good at blocking, if you're not going to pass, if you're not going in defending.

If you can build up all these different skills and make a well-rounded player out of yourself, I think they'll definitely give you the benefit of doubt. Again mentioning mom, one thing that she told me when I was first starting out was make your worst skill your best. For me actually, I hated passing when I first started. Whereas now, I would consider passing my strongest skill because I worked on it so much and I was like, okay, if I want to be progressive in the sport, I'm going to have to not avoid this thing that I dislike but really dive into it and get better at it.

Santa: That's great advice. What are you doing right now?

Coltyn: Currently, I am in Gatineau, Quebec and this is where the Men's National Team's center is out of. Right now, we're in a bit of an evaluation phase, and next week, they're selecting guides to different rosters. Everyone in here is on the senior national team but now, the next phase is selecting lots of different rosters whether that's the senior A team or the next-gen team or for a younger U21 and U23 team. That's where I'm at right now is with the national team.

It's really exciting because Josephson who has just been recently selected as the head coach. I've known him essentially since I started playing volleyball and he's coached different camps that I've been at. I know that he's always pushed me to be great and just the week that I've had with him so far, it's been a pretty incredible experience so I'm excited to keep that going.

Honestly, I love being at Gatineau, it's a lot of fun just being here with all the guys and it creates a great brotherhood as well as just the high-performance aspect of it and getting to represent your country because I think everyone here but me, especially I have a huge dream of playing in Olympics one day, so this is just the next stepping stone.

Santa: Well, we wish you all the best with that. What's your plans after you finish your volleyball career? You have this great kinesiology degree, what do you think you might be doing after volleyball?

Coltyn: After volleyball. That's a bit of a gray area because the next stage for me in general is playing professionally. I'm going to be doing that this upcoming year but after volleyball, I've debated maybe going back to school and getting a master's. I've also debated different things like sports psych or I guess personal training. I thought about maybe physio at one point but I'm not too sure.

Honestly, it's something that I'm going to be thinking about over the next little bit because for everyone playing sports, sports is one of the owing, I guess, careers that has an end or a foreseeable end. You're not going to be playing professional volleyball until you're 50, 60. It ends earlier than most careers so we want to make sure that you have a good foundation for after that. It's great that I have my

undergrad in kinesiology but what I'm going to do with it is still got to be determined, to be honest.

Santa: There's no rush because you're nowhere near 50 or 60. In any case, thank you so much for telling your story but also, more importantly, thanks so much for being a great student-athlete at UBC. As you know, I and my family have enjoyed a lot of games, we've cheered you on, and you've really been a memorable part of our experience here at the university. Thank you for that and best of luck in Quebec, in the national team, and we'll be looking out for you, and cheering you wherever you might be. Thanks a lot.

Coltyn: Thank you, appreciate that.

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Santa: Coltyn, thanks so much for being on *Blue & Goldcast* today. Coltyn Liu plays on the UBC Men's Volleyball Team and is a kinesiology student. That does it for this episode. You can find links to our guests' 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 Spotify. You can tweet me @ubcpres, that's prez with a Z. I'm Santa Ono, thanks for listening.