

Transcript- Episode 62 – The Blind Sport Podcast

Paratriathlon with Amy Dixon

Published: 18 June 2016 at <http://www.theblindsportpodcast.com> where you can download or listen to the audio podcast version.

Introduction

This is episode 62 of The Blind Sport Podcast entitled Paratriathlon with Amy Dixon.

Hi I'm Mike, and this is The Blind Sport Podcast. The sports show for the blind, the partially sighted and the supportive sighty. Thanks for joining me for episode 62.

On the show we'll be talking with Amy Dixon from the US about Paratriathlon.

Amy ranks in the world's top ten of blind and vision impaired female triathletes. Triathlon is a challenging game, and in order to do well, you need to love the focus and commitment that this sport demands. But if you can swim, cycle and run, then hey, why not give it a shot.

Hi there, I hope this episode finds you fit and well.

Before we chat to Amy, I would like to thank you for the feedback received re episode 61, where we spoke with Gillian Walker from New Zealand about Ironman.

Some of the comments that I received included:

From Carolyn. A wonderful episode. Very inspiring. Determination is truly a gift for Gillian.

From Stan. Great work. I really enjoyed Gillian's story. It shows that we all can do way more than we think.

Please email me with any comments

Contact Jingle - To contact Mike or comment on The Blind Sport Podcast, submit a feedback form from the website www.theblindsportpodcast.com, email Mike@theblindsportpodcast.com, send us a tweet or follow us on Twitter @blindsportmike, or visit The Blind Sport Podcast page on Facebook.

Interview

Triathlon is a very popular sport these days. And with so many distance options to choose from, as long as you can swim, cycle and run a little then there's probably a level for you.

If you want to compete as a blind or vision impaired triathlete, then you might want to find out more about Paratriathlon. Check out www.triathlon.org/paratriathlon for more information.

Mike - Hi Amy, welcome to the show.

Amy - Well, thank you for having me Mike.

Mike - Brilliant. Can you just start off by telling us your personal story of vision loss?

Amy – Yeah, so my vision loss started when I was 22 years old. I was at the University of Connecticut studying Pharmacy and working towards my doctorate in Pharmaceuticals and in my fifth year of school I noticed everything was strobing and flashing one day while looking through a microscope. And I was working in the restaurant business at night in order to pay for school. Became trained as a sommelier selling wine at night and the restaurant was very dark and I was having a more and more difficult time navigating the restaurant at night. I was bumping in to people. I was knocking things over. I would go to pour wine in to somebody's glass and I would miss and it was really embarrassing.

Mike - That's a good look.

Amy - Yip, it's very good. You know, dumping red wine on a white table cloth is always lovely at dinner. So I literally thought I was just overtired. I was working full time and going to school full time, burning the candle at both ends and I just thought I needed a break and so it was right after midterms and I finally went to go and see my neurologist because I had suffered from migraines since I was a kid. I thought that maybe the strobing and the flashing had something to do with my headaches even though I wasn't necessarily experiencing a headache at the time but I figured he could have a logical answer.

And so I went to see him and he held his hand out to the side and asked me how many fingers he was holding up and I told him that there was a black curtain where his arm should be. He was actually cut off right at the shoulders when I was making eye contact with him and he said "Oh boy, that's not good" He's like "We're going to go downstairs and see an Ophthalmologist".

So he marched me downstairs in his building to the Eye Doctor that shared the same practice. And they looked in the back of my eye and the first thing they asked me was if I had been sick recently, which I thought was a really strange question. Yeah, I thought that was a really odd question, we're talking about my eyesight and not necessarily overall health and I said well, yeah actually as a matter of fact I had a sinus infection about a month and a half ago and they sort of all nodded their heads. I got really frustrated and said can you clue me in on what you're thinking here?

They said actually we've seen this before in a journal once. It's very rare but we're pretty sure you have this condition called Multifocal Choroiditis which is an inflammatory condition of the retina caused by an overactive immune system. So you know, you just happen to have the right set of circumstances for this sinus

infection and it triggered an immune response and you have antibodies that are attacking your retina essentially.

I was like, oh well, how great, well how do we fix it? Well you don't. I said oh well, that's not great. And so I ended up on high doses of steroids which actually slowed it down and I was sort of in remission for a number of years. I was continuing to drive although I was a little more careful about driving at night, driving in the rain, things like that .

Then I got Bronchitis six years later and so I stopped driving for a living. At that point I was working in the wine business full time because I couldn't be a visually impaired Pharmacist. But I really loved my job and got to travel all over Europe and all over the United States, to California buying wines for my employer.

But then it got to the point that I couldn't really do that kind of driving so I went to work in retail wine. Eight years ago I got Bronchitis again and it wiped out most of my remaining vision so I'm down to about two percent of useable vision in my right eye and the left eye is pretty much down to about four or five percent of useable vision. Out of a hundred and eighty degrees peripheral vision, I've got about five degrees left so not much but what I do see is mostly, I still have that strobing and flashing so I have constant photopsia, sort of like a camera lens opening and shutting really fast like a fast shutter speed so I see pictures of images and then they disappear and then they reappear. And the challenge for me as an athlete is that the higher my heart rate is, the less I can see because that strobing and flashing gets faster and faster and the light gets brighter and brighter to the point where it washes out everything I can see.

Mike – Wow.

Amy - So it's a little challenging.

Mike - Good fun aye.

Amy - Yeah, it's good fun. It's like a laser light, show all day long.

Mike – Living by slideshow.

Amy - Exactly. It's like I'm in a disco.

Mike – So once that vision loss happened, what got you in to triathlon? Why did triathlon become the sport of choice?

Amy – Well interestingly enough I grew up on a horse farm. I rode horses. After college I started competing professionally with my horse and really, really missed that kind of activity and I grew up swimming as soon as I could walk. I was in the swim team from the time I was five years old all through high school. I played tennis

and soccer in high school as well and ironically I was a terrible runner. I really hated running in high school and that's why I played goalie when I played soccer and that's why I rode horses and did anything to be a non-runner.

I had gone through a steroid treatment again eight years ago and I gained seventy pounds. I gained quite a bit of weight from all the steroids and then when the steroids were no longer working to control my disease they actually put me on chemotherapy for two years to suppress my immune system even further and I was really, really sick from the chemo and just really beaten down and frustrated with the weight gain and a friend of mine had suggested, hey, you mentioned that you used to swim. Have you thought about getting back in the pool? And with the extra seventy pounds it really hurt to do anything and swimming actually sounded appealing because it was going to be the least impact on my body and so I got back in the pool and sort of splashed around and made it through a few painful laps and was actually like this wasn't so bad and lost that ten pounds getting back in the pool and then I started riding a stationary bike at my local gym, at the YMCA and lost another fifteen pounds doing that.

And then for me I knew that the fastest way for me to lose weight was going to be to run but I couldn't figure out how to do that safely because of my vision impairment and so I would tie myself to a treadmill using an elastic band and holding on for dear life and praying I didn't fall off, that I didn't step off the mat and so I started walk / jogging like that, and through social media, through Facebook, said so your swimming and your biking and you're running indoors. Have you ever thought about doing a triathlon? And I said that's crazy, blind people can't do triathlons. That's dangerous. She said no seriously I'm actually a guide for a visually impaired athlete that just did an ironman and if you're interested I'd be happy to teach you the sport and do your first race with you. And I was like, that sounds like fun and I'm of the mind that I'll try anything once and so she started signing me up for these weekly group runs through a local disabled track club and I met with them a couple of times a week and went to a couple of clinics and got back in to swimming a little more. And then borrowed a tandem bike from a member of my community and we did our first race and that was three years ago this week.

Mike - Wow. So it's been a pretty short road?

Amy – It's nuts. I know, I can't believe.

Mike - Currently you're in the top six woman triathletes in the world and number two in the states. What does the road to Rio look like for you? What does life look like now up for the next few months?

Amy - For the next few months I will be finding out on July 8th whether or not I've gotten a spot for Team USA so I'm sitting here anxiously counting the days and hours and minutes and seconds until that happens.

I've done everything I can at this point to secure myself a spot. I had a not great showing at world championships. I finished in seventh place. I was pretty sick leading up to the race. Finished second at the continental championships, at the Pan Am Cup last month and I just won in Japan last week so I've maxed out the number of points that I can possibly earn for the season by doing those three races so now it's just a waiting game to see how the rest of the points work out for the next four weeks and it doesn't look like, there are only two races left and barring some sort of really weird miracle of math, I should be in a good spot.

We're waiting for the International Olympic Committee to make the final decision on whose going and our belief is that they are taking the top eight and so mathematically there's no way that I can be dropped out of the top seven so I should be going but we'll know soon.

Mike - Here's hoping aye.

Amy - We'll know soon. Yeah, it's nerve-racking. All I can do is focus on training and doing the best to hydrate and rest and train and eat well until Rio. And Rio is going to be on September 11th which is when our race is. In the meantime I've got the world championships coming up in Rotterdam in the Netherlands in July which should be really fun. So I'm looking forward to that and then we've got a couple of Team USA camps at the end of August to get ready for Rio.

Mike - Cool. So that's pretty busy. How do you balance out the training with the work schedule? How does work, work for you? Are you a professional athlete? Do you have to do a day job?

Amy - No, my day job is training at this point. I had to stop working five years ago due to the chemotherapy and steroids. In addition, after I went through chemo and steroids, I started having surgery because in addition to Uveitis and now have Glaucoma.

Mike - Oh, congratulations.

Amy - Yeah, go big or go home. You know. I was just trying to show up all my other blind friends by having two diseases.

So I ended up with Glaucoma and fortunately or unfortunately is that the younger you are with Glaucoma, the more difficult it is to treat because young people have healthy immune systems and because my immune system is broken already, I produce excessive scar tissue so every time they tried to do surgery to correct or manage the Glaucoma with a valve or with a trabeculectomy to lower the pressure in my eye, it scars over immediately after surgery.

So I've had nineteen surgeries in the last four years and so I've not been able to return to full time work because of all the surgeries I keep on having. A little of a

challenge but you know the blessing is that I have a really great team of doctors that sort of get my crazy lifestyle and have managed to sort of baby me through training and work around my schedule and be flexible regarding a treatment plan. Because we know that I'm going to lose the rest of my vision to Glaucoma. I'm a ticking time bomb at this point.

At this point it's about maintaining as much of a quality of life as I possibly can and pain management so if we can keep the scar tissue from eradicating the rest of my vision while keeping me comfortable and also allowing me to train and go on my own schedule, then it's a win, win situation.

Mike –So how do you fund all of that Amy? Because training is not cheap, doing events isn't cheap and then you've got to live as well so how does life work financially for you?

Amy – Well, I've been pounding the pavement and the blessing of my old job is that I used to teach wine classes and I took the Dale Carnegie leadership course in public speaking class and so I used to teach public speaking and so now I'm a speaker and I travel around the country and talk to different medical conferences, different schools and organisations, like next week I'm talking about disability inclusion in the workplace at a Gas and Electric company out in San Diego. And then Garmin, who make the amazing triathlon watches that I use, I'm going to come out and speak to their partners in August about technology and how it helps the visually impaired not only manage disease but also to compete in sports so that's sort of how I've been funding it and a lot of donations to the US Association of Blind Athletes have been kind enough to set up a 501C3 tax deductible account that people can donate to and so that's who I've been funding it.

And as of this year, as of January of 2016 I made the national team for Team USA which is great so my race related travel is covered but training travel is not and the problem is for me that I live on the east coast of the United States and the woman that will be guiding me for Rio lives in California on the opposite coast.

Mike - A small commute.

Amy - It's a little bit of a, you know, six hour plane ride is a little challenging so I've been going out there once a month because she's married with young kids so it's easier for me to travel to her than her to travel to me so I throw my bike and my dog in the plane and go out there, train for a week at a time and get ready to race. My coach is out there. Challenged Athlete Foundation is out there.

And honestly I would actually move out there if it wasn't so disruptive to everything going on before Rio, I would move out there full time but the challenge with my eye disease is that my glaucoma is so unstable is that it's very difficult to leave Connecticut for two longer stretch because I need to see my surgeon so many times in a month. So here I am, commuting to California.

Mike- There you go. So based on that you're obviously doing a lot of solo or alone training?

Amy - I am. So I rely a lot on treadmills. I can see well enough to run on a track as long as it's not populated. Or I wear a giant bright yellow vest that says blind and pray that somebody can read and not run in to me.

Mike - So you can still see the lane lines?

Amy - Yeah, I can see the lane lines and I can see the contrast between the red track and the green grass so that's very helpful. But you know, if I have a longer run, that's super boring just sitting going on a track on circles for an hour.

Mike - Yeah, that's pretty mind numbing isn't it?

Amy - Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. I'm grateful because there are a lot of really fast triathletes in my area but I call it my first world problem, because the faster I get the harder it is to find guides. Which is really quite funny and I never really imagined I would actually have this problem. So now I usually have to train with men, male guides because the women who are fast enough to guide me are probably racing on the weekend or doing their own races and training for their own races, so they have their own very specific workout that they are doing. So I try to find a lot of guys who are fast like local triathletes but this weekend I ran in to the problem that they're all racing. There was just one big local race. Part of the challenge series races, so everybody who is local is going to that so I got stuck. I actually found a guy who's a marathon runner whose not doing this triathlon this weekend. I begged him to join me tomorrow so he's going to guide me for my run which is really helpful.

But then all my bike riding is on a single bike that's hooked up to a trainer. And then in the pool, like I said I had been swimming before I could walk so I'm very comfortable in the pool because twenty five yards is twenty five yards and it's pretty easy for me to figure that out. Just count my strokes.

Mike - Now you mentioned in training that you could still use the limited vision you've got. Can you use it in an event or do you have to wear sort of blind fold or black out goggles?

Amy - Well there are three different classifications of vision impairment in triathlon. There is B1, B2 and B3.

B1 is considered minimal light perception. You could maybe see shapes or colours with the right lighting conditions and things like that.

B2 is that you can see shapes and colours. Probably your acuity is very bad.

And then B3 is like me where you have tunnel vision. You have no peripheral vision. And so as a B3 athlete I get a 3 minute and 48 second penalty behind the B1 athletes which is a lot of time to make up in a sprint distance triathlon.

And they came up with that factor system through sort of a combination of the data that they collected from Track and Field in the Paralympics and the data that they collected from swimming. It is obviously not a perfect factor system because we haven't; paratriathlon has not been recognised as a sport in the Paralympics until this year so it's going to be a good three years before they finally come up with a really more accurate factor but I'm grateful that we get to participate at all. Right now it's a long time to be sitting on a dock while the other athletes start ahead of you. It's a lot of time to make up where you have to be 3 minutes and 48 seconds faster than those girls and honestly in my opinion the only place that I have an advantage over the totally blind athletes is in transition because in transition I can find my helmet, I can find my shoes, I can find my sunglasses. When I'm putting them on in transition without help from my guide generally speaking and they need help or they need to feel for it. But that's maybe ten or fifteen seconds. So it will be interesting to see once they have more data and more visually impaired athletes start doing paratriathlon, how that factor systems going to change in the next four years before Tokyo in 2020.

Mike - For sure. Now is Paralympic triathlon a normal Olympic sized triathlon or is it the sprint sized?

Amy - It's a sprint distance and unfortunately I would prefer because I'm 40 years old, and doing a sprint distance triathlon just hurts like hell going that fast. It's excruciatingly painful but the Olympic distance I think it awesome. The only thing and unfortunately it comes down to TV ratings that they felt that viewers were not going to tune in for two and a half hours to watch an Olympic distance triathlon in the sport of paratriathlon. But they would tune in for an hour. So we are now sprint distance athletes because of that.

Mike - Wow. Now do you have a favourite discipline of the three? Is there one that stands out as being better or more of a favourite?

Amy - Yeah, for sure. I love the bike because I really, really miss driving cars. I really enjoyed driving fast, I like driving sports cars, I like driving convertibles so which is probably why I loved riding horses for so many years. I really like speed, I like going fast, I like taking risks and the bike is the closest thing I can get to drive these days. Obviously I'm on the back of the bike because I'm on a tandem so I'm not really driving the bike but I feel like I'm driving the bike.

I always crack up because there are always great pictures of me on the bike and my coach always laughs and he says you're always smiling on the bike and he goes you should be in so much pain that you can't smile. I said no, I'm happy to be on there. I feel like a dog with my head out the window. I'm going fast and there is fresh air

and it's just exciting and you're carving really sharp turns and it's just a blast. So, the bike is for sure and it's also my strength and I think again that comes from years of riding horses and being in that sort of athletic position with your hips and your knees bent and you're sort of crouched there. Sort of perched on the bike and I my muscle memory is really good in that position. It seems to be where I'm the strongest.

Running, I really suffer on the run and I'm learning to become a good runner but it just takes so much work. Running is really the bane of my existence. I'm learning to love it but it doesn't come easily to me.

Mike – Now we'd all like to think that every event is our best but can you sort of go through some of the toughest ones you've ever had to endure?

Amy – Oh, for sure. The toughest race that I ever had to endure was on March 21st or March 14th in Sarasota, Florida of this year. That was the Continental Championship. Now I know what it feels like to have your heart rate at 184 for 23 minutes. I woke up in the med tent after the race and my chiropractor who is a really sweet man. He flew down all the way from across the country from California to Florida to watch me race because it was going to be my qualifier for Rio. If I had won that race I would have guaranteed myself a spot on the team and I literally gutted myself and finished in second place, 19 seconds back behind my teammate. I did everything in my power including blowing myself up in order to win that race but on the day it just didn't happen.

It was mentally the hardest day getting passed on the run by my teammate and just watching that Rio spot slip away from me knowing that you know that I physically couldn't go any faster than I was going and I was already maxed out. And at that point I still had almost a mile and half to go on the race and I thought I can't stand; I'm not going to be able to stand up. A huge testament to my guide and this is where I say as a Paralympic hopeful the blind athletes have such a big advantage over other disability categories because we have guides. I've got somebody right there next to me talking to me, talking me off the ledge mentally. I have somebody coaching me and cheerleading me and reminding me about my form and telling me to drive with my arms and keep my chin up and my shoulders back and keep breathing through my nose. All these great things that when you're in a lot of pain and you're suffering and you're going as hard as you can and you're feeling like you're going to die and someone is right there just talking you off the ledge. Talking you through every step of the race and Suzanne, she's such a great athlete herself and she has won Ironman Kona and she's set the world record in Masters age group champion at Kona last year. She was on the US Olympic team as an able bodied athlete back in 2000. I mean she is just an amazing, amazing athlete and so to have somebody like that, you know, whose also been in that kind of pain herself and knows exactly how I'm feeling at that moment and can talk me through it and keep me going and also give me all the data that I need by telling me, ok here is our current pace. This is where the second place person is. This is where the third place person is. This is how far away from the finish line. Ok, we've got a bump up ahead

or a curb or three, two, one, step up and just keeping my head in the game when everything in my body is telling me to quit. It's such a big advantage over athletes that have amputations or are in wheelchairs because they are out there by themselves and their playing their own mental game with themselves and trying to keep going when they are really hurting. So of all the disabilities I feel that I could have as a Paralympic athlete; I think being blind it puts you in the best position because you have the advantage of somebody being right there with you.

Mike - For sure. And you've gone right through to full Ironman level?

Amy - I have not done Ironman yet. I'm dying to when I'm allowed to do it. As long as we're on the US national team for paratriathlon, they want us to focus on our sprint distance so we're not allowed to compete at that distance until after Rio and it's certainly on my bucket list. I'd like to do it just because it sounds like a fun, cool thing to do. But I'd like to do a couple of marathons, I'd like to do the Boston marathon after the Paralympics. I'd like to do a Ragner Relay, which is where everybody runs for 24 hours, you do in one hour shifts and everybody sleeps in a bus and drives and things like that. So things like that. Just fun, goofy, cool things to do with my friends. A couple of fun 100 mile bike rides. Just things that are not in my wheelhouse right now so looking forward to it.

Mike - So obviously you're training a lot but what does your general recovery plan consist of?

Amy – Well, it's very funny I just texted one of my training partners and said the current state of my nutrition. I was eating prosciutto and then rice cereal and she goes what the hell is that? I said I don't know, my body was just craving it. I was craving salt and something crunchy and some coconut milk and she's sort of shaking her head at me. Yeah, my nutrition needs a little bit of work.

But my recovery is the key to being able to race and get faster especially being 40 years old and having an autoimmune disease that not only attacks my eyes but attacks my lungs and my intestines so I have a lot of other issues in addition to being visually impaired which are in some ways more debilitating to me than being visually impaired.

And so I spent a lot of time, I have recovery boots here that are compression boots that are made by a company called Recovery Pumps so I'll sit on the couch at night with my laptop and have my feet up on the couch and be messing around on Facebook or writing blog posts or responding to emails and just getting my legs squeezed to get all the lactic acid out so the next day I can go out and perform at the level I need to or to train at the level I need to.

A lot of Epsom salt baths. Lots of massage. It's key. I've got a great sports massage therapist who just really works on all of the scar tissue in my legs and in my back with the swimming.

I get a lot of what they call ART, Active Release Therapy which is excruciatingly painful but works really well. It's like a masochistic form of massage. If you like torture, it's great. It lasts for about 20 minutes and they go in there and they work on very specific. You sort of have to have a plan before you go in. You go ok I need to work on my calf and my left scapula and the right side of my oblique's and so they will do that and they will literally get right in to the muscle. It's very, very painful but it's quick and dirty and it's very effective and again, it keeps little things from becoming big things.

And that's one thing I learned as an older athlete, you have to address all those things that may be nagging you right now. Make a big deal out of it in the beginning. Otherwise it's going to be really expensive to fix and it means a lot of time off to recovery and fix it. And my coach is really good about making sure I don't stay injured.

And then, stretching, particularly with running. I do a lot of stretching. I should and would like to say that I do Yoga but I don't really have the time or the patience sometimes but yeah, it's pretty much massage, acupuncture, chiropractic. All those things that sort of have people just working on this 40 year old body to keep it moving .

And making sure I stay away from dairy and I stay away from gluten because my disease is an autoimmune disease that attacks my eyes and so any time you introduce gluten or dairy in to a diet, they can trigger inflammation so for people that have these types of diseases so I just stay away from it. I cheat every now and then for good cookies. I have a cookie problem.

Mike – Oh oh.

Amy - Yeah I really do. I have a really bad cookie problem but I'm finding more and more gluten free options that are good.

Mike - Good score. Now there must be a lot of people with disabilities that are in to competitive sport that do need to take various types of medication to manage their situation. How does that fit in with drug testing for competitive sport?

Amy - It's challenging honestly. For me, one of the interesting problems that I'm dealing with right now is I have asthma and that's part of this whole body disease is that it's an inflammatory condition that produces scar tissue throughout my body including my lungs, my intestines, my connective tissues and my eyes and so because of the glaucoma I'm on a variety of eye drops. I'm on Timolol, Presnisolone, Restasis, Alphagan, Prolenza and Ketrolac. All these different eye drops. And the problem with the eye drops is that they cause a lot of post nasal drip and that's just a common side effect of taking eye drops and you can do everything you can. You pinch your tear ducts closed for five minutes after you put the drops in to avoid some

of the systemic side effects which is a smart thing to do for any eye patient that's taking eye drops.

However, you still absorb some of it down your sinuses and so I have these chronic inflammation in my sinuses from the eye drops and that inflammation then drips down in to my throat which gets down to my chest and then I end up with bronchitis.

And because again it's an autoimmune disease, my immune system is somewhat compromised so I easily get sick and right before my race in Japan, I ended up having to go on antibiotics and steroids when steroids are a banned substance during competition unless you have a special exemption from your doctor so it has to be on file through the US Anti-Doping Agency and the World Anti-Doping Agency to let them know that yes, there is a medical need to take this particular drug during competition time and blah, blah, blah.

And it's a very arduous process to get that piece of paper so we're trying right now to uncover the mystery that can stop this sort of cycle that I keep getting these infections because as we get closer to Rio, I'm going to be training even harder which means my immune system is going to be further compromised and I cannot stop the eye drops for the glaucoma because otherwise the glaucoma will take the rest of my vision. So it's sort of a nasty balance that we're trying to figure out.

So right now we're sort of experimenting with different nasal sprays to see if we can dry out the sinus cavity to keep it from dripping in to the back of my throat and in to my chest.

So it's a really interesting process and there are a lot of patients and a lot of athletes that have glaucoma or have different eye diseases that have to take drops and this is actually not as uncommon as you would think. But how to address it can be really tricky because again you have to be careful about the whole steroid thing so it's a medical mystery but I'm glad that I've got a good team of doctors that are problem solving and scratching their heads trying to figure it all out.

Mike - For sure. And amongst competition how do you make sure that there is no form of cheating? I mean cheating is in every sport, but how do people have to be especially careful within triathlon as a blind athlete?

Amy - As a blind athlete, the interesting thing is that our races are not draft legal as in I run the ITU circuit, the International Triathlon Union, so it's really difficult on some of these courses because they have tried to make it very spectator friendly.

For instance we have just tried to race in Japan two weeks ago, and it's right in downtown Yokohama and it's so beautiful and thousands of people show up and all these crowds and it's lovely. And they have all these barricades on either side of the street and it's in downtown Yokohama and you're sort of zigging and zagging in between these buildings and the course is really narrow and technical and

complicated but with a tandem which is an eight foot long bike with two people on it, you generally are much faster than a single bike and we start around the same time as the amputees and the wheelchair athletes so you've got to be really careful because you're constantly overtaking them because we're a little bit faster than a hand cycle or a single bike so you're constantly trying to stay out of somebody else's draft zone so that you don't get penalised because I think it's like a one minute penalty if you draft off somebody so when you're talking about a course that has multiple laps and it's a really tight course because it's in a downtown area and you have a variety of athletes with different language barriers, because you can scream "On your left" and the guy is Japanese says I don't know what that means .

We had that problem when we were racing in Brazil last year and I'm like, I know Spanish, I speak Spanish but I don't speak Portuguese and I was like oh my gosh I need to learn the words for "On your left" or the phrase "On your left" in Portuguese .

I remember I was yelling and yelling at the Portuguese athlete and he wouldn't move out of our way and he has no idea what we're doing back there. So I was like, oh my gosh we're going to get a penalty or like we're going to get in trouble so we were trying to stay away from him but pass him safely without crashing which was quite an interesting problem.

And then for the blind athletes in particular not only the drafting issue is you have to be careful on the swim and on the run that you don't get what's called pulling or leading by your guide. And for the swim we're tethered. Some people like to put it on their waist, some people like to put it on their leg. I've just started using it on my leg and it's been a little bit more effective. On my waist it kept riding up or down, at least if I put it over one leg it can only ride up so far and then it just goes in my inseam. The nice thing about it being around one leg is that it stays out of my stroke so I never seem to hit the tether with my hand which is good so I can take a full stroke.

Mike –So on your leg you have to very much synchronise your step with your guide?

Amy – No, because I have it really high up on my thigh. Almost up by my butt, just below my butt, up there. And so that seems to be a really good place for it. It's high enough that it's not going to get tangled in my legs and its low enough that my arms not going to hit it.

So I had to be careful because we swim next to our guides, and there is actually and this is something I'm trying to work on before Rio is finding that sweet spot because there is actually a draft that you can catch off your guide if you get off their hip and like a really good spot with your head just above their hip, but below their arm. The problem is that half the time you get clobbered in the face by their stroke. So when I find it, it's challenging because she'll accidentally hit my goggles or knock my goggles off, or I'll hit her arm with my arm so we're still trying. Her wetsuits black and so you can't see her because of the black wetsuit and her cap is usually white, which sometimes makes it blend in with the sky so still trying to figure out how to do it.

Because I know a couple of visually impaired athletes that are good at finding that spot but I think a lot of it depends on the degree of vision that you have and so one of the things that you have to be careful about is that you do get busted or if you do end up slowing down too much and your guide gets too far ahead of you, you get disqualified. And unfortunately, you were talking about cheating, that happens in several races last year there were two athletes in particular that were disqualified or one was disqualified, one wasn't. They had video footage of them getting pulled in the swim. Very clearly, they were almost behind their guides and that's a big no, no.

And I can see how it can happen for the B1, the totally blind athletes, because being totally blind and being in the water is like sensory deprivation so it's very easy to panic. I've panicked in open water just because it's a very dark space, you can't really hear much, there is a lot of splashing going on, sometimes you're getting kicked or punched or hit and it really can be terrifying if you're not used to it and not prepared for it and if you're a totally blind athlete and you've got that sort of sensory deprivation and your stop swimming and panic and your guide doesn't necessarily know it right away and your guide continues to swim a little bit further, and you get dragged by the tether. That can happen. I've seen it happen with a gentleman in the US team who is totally blind. And I saw him get disqualified at a race because he had a panic attack and stopped swimming and his guide yanked him by accident.

So there is a fine line between that and allowing your guide to tighten the tether pretty tight and then basically pull you alongside of them which is a big no, no.

But unfortunately people have done it. But I believe that the ITU officials will catch the people that have been doing it and I know they'll be watching it for sure in Rio. I know it will be on camera.

Mike – When things are getting tough Amy, do you have a favourite quotation or personal saying that seems to get you through?

Amy - I like to think of a couple of things. You don't need sight to have vision, which is true. And one thing I like to remind myself is that the only disability is the one in our head. The only limitations are the ones that we have in our heads because honestly I do more now with vision loss than I ever did before.

I mean I was a busy girl beforehand but I certainly never would have gone and signed up for a triathlon. I certainly wouldn't be hopping on planes and travelling all over the country by myself. I think I would have been terrified to do that.

Having a guide dog has given me a lot of confidence which is wonderful. I've got a German Shepherd who just started working for me eight weeks ago. His name is Woodstock. My first guide dog retired six months ago and his name was Elvis who was a yellow Lab, very sweet dog. And honestly I feel very able bodied when I have a dog next to me. I just feel very much included and there's literally nothing I can't do that I did before vision loss other than drive a car and even then every now and

then my friends will let me hop in a golf cart and let me drive it around. So I get my driving fix when I hop in a golf cart.

It's amazing to me now that I've been involved in the Paralympic sport is I'll go to swim team practice with Team USA back at the Olympic Training Centre and on a pool deck, there's like two guide dogs, there's a whole bunch of wheelchairs, a bunch of prosthetic legs, prosthetic arm, and crutches and things like that. And it looks like a bomb went off. What the hell happened to all these people? And it's just amazing.

All those people are in the pool, crushing workouts, doing four thousand meters at a clip, not batting an eyelash. They are exceptional athletes whether they are able bodied or disabled. I mean they could kick any body's butt. To be able to train alongside them, I realised that, I almost feel unworthy because I feel like I'm just little me with my vision loss. I realise that a lot of these people deal with phantom leg pain and deal with the prosthetics not fitting or their prosthetics falling off, or breaking. And them not being able to get around as easily and things like that. Or the wheelchair athletes you know, travelling in New York City with a wheelchair athlete recently, and we realised that the couple of subway stations didn't have lifts, didn't have an elevator. And so things like that, that you take for granted.

Just when you think that your impairment is the most difficult, it really gives you pause and perspective when you spend time with athletes that have other kinds of physical limitations and you feel very lucky to have what you have. So I realised that all these guys they have the best attitude of the athletes that I train with, because they all just figure out a way. And there are these amazing adaptations.

And the nice thing about being visually impaired right now in history, if I became blind thirty years ago, my story would have been much different. Whereas now, my phone talks to me, my computer talks to me, I've got all kinds of public transportation, there are all kinds of great apps that tell me what kind of currency I'm holding, can translate things for me, can tell me what colour my clothes are. So that didn't exist thirty years ago. I just feel really lucky to be going blind right now.

Mike - Any final words of advice for anybody that is considering getting into triathlon as a sport?

Amy – Oh yeah. I recommend everyone try it once. The nice thing for me, my very first race three years ago, it was a fundraiser for the Leukaemia and Lymphoma Society and there were people of every shape and size out there doing it. Some were walking on the run, some were on a little old cruiser, granny bike, a little beach cruiser bike. Some were breast stroking with their head above water and some were doggy paddling in the swim and I was like, oh my gosh. And I thought if these guys can do it I have no excuses and literally, hey if you have to wear a pool noodle to get through the swim, whatever. I mean, really, it's just like there is nothing. You'll never have a chance to have a second first race, so to do it once and promise yourself that

you're going to see it through. It doesn't matter if you're the last finisher of the day, just to do it. It's such a sense of accomplishment and you realise that, like I said, the only limitations are the ones in our head.

Mike - Definitely.

Amy - Yeah.

Mike - Now can you share any contact details or ways that people can find out more about you Amy?

Amy - Yeah. I have an athlete Facebook page, that is called the Amy Dixon Blind Athlete and you can follow me there. I'm a pretty prolific poster, lots of silly selfies with my dog and goofy shenanigans that we get ourselves in to.

And I'm also on Twitter and Instagram at wineandhorses. Two of my former professions were wine and training horses, so it's an easy way to find me there.

And my website is www.amydixonusa.com and if people feel so inclined to sponsor me or make a tax deductible donation, they can do it through the website with a credit card, very easily.

And if they want to message me, they can message me through the website or through my Facebook page and I'm pretty responsive because like I said I'm a Facebook addict.

Mike - Thanks Amy, that's been brilliant. That's given us a great overview as to what you're up to and obviously the mission you're on as well so that's great. Thank you so much.

Amy - Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it and I'm excited to hopefully represent my country in Rio this summer and crossing my fingers and toes that that's going to be a reality soon.

Mike - Definitely. Good luck.

Amy - Thank you.

Jingle – You're listening to the blind sport podcast with Mike Lloyd. The sports show that's dedicated to blind sport.

Quotations

OK some quotations for episode 62 that include the word "Try".

"It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."

“Defeat is not the worst of failures. Not to have tried is the true failure.”

“There's doubt in trying. Just do it.”

“When people keep telling you that you can't do a thing, you kind of like to try it. ”

“Maybe the future is like rowing for the shore. Your only choice is to try or give up.”

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

And lastly from Michael Jordan. “I can accept failure, everyone fails at something. But I can't accept not trying.”

Closing

I hope you enjoyed our chat with Amy Dixon. That was awesome. A huge thank you to Amy for sharing her stories and experiences with us.

If you're a Triathlete or are thinking of getting into Triathlon, then do send me an email and tell me what you're up to.

If you have a story or know of a person who you think would be great to feature on a future show, then do contact me and let's make it happen.

Likewise, if you have any comments or opinions on the show then please do fire me off an email. mike@theblindsportpodcast.com

That would be cool.

Contact Jingle - To contact Mike or comment on The Blind Sport Podcast, submit a feedback form from the website www.theblindsportpodcast.com, email Mike@theblindsportpodcast.com, send us a tweet or follow us on Twitter @blindsportmike, or visit The Blind Sport Podcast page on Facebook.

Mike - To help me with the growth of The Blind Sport Podcast I need your help.

If you know of others who may get value from listening to this show, then please do tell them about it.

Tell your friends, your family, your club members, your work colleagues, whether it be face-to-face or via social networks, let's get the word out there.

If we do this together, we can promote the awareness of Blind Sports and make a difference.

OK, that's us for another episode, so train hard, play fair, give it your all and most importantly, enjoy your sport.

Thanks for listening. Take care. See ya.

Closing Announcer - Thank you for listening to another edition of The Blind Sport Podcast. The sports show that's dedicated to blind sport. With Mike Lloyd. Visit theblindsportpodcast.com

End of transcript