



Don Yaeger

Dolf, thanks so much for joining us.

Dolf Berle

It is just great to be with you, Don.

Don Yaeger

I appreciate you and the opportunity now to learn more from you is meaningful. And I know, I know how important athletics is to you. And in fact, in the prep work, I had a chance to go back and look at some of your career at Monument Mountain Regional High School in Massachusetts. And by the way, congratulations on being inducted into that school's Hall of Fame. But you gravitated in all of your sporting gifts to track and field and I'm wondering why...

Dolf Berle

Well Don, this takes me way back even before high school and I grew up in a pretty remote part of Massachusetts in the far west and dairy farming was the family business. And I remember from my earliest, earliest memories of any kind of things that anything athletic was that we had carpentry

available to us and we had a lot of hay bales. And the ability to go out and run and jump and fly through the air is something that I loved from my very earliest memories, even as a child just going and jumping on pillows. So high jumping, and eventually pole vaulting, and certainly long jumping, were all things that I really connected with at a very young age. And then as I got a little older, the whole concept and passion and history around the Olympics really captured my imagination and the intellectual part of, of my life. And so, track and field just was a natural fit with all of those things.

Don Yaeger

I love it. And then you go to Harvard, where you're part of the track and field team there. Was there a coach... Was there someone who helped you kind of wrap your arms around some of these concepts about what you were learning and how you could apply them?

Dolf Berle

One was a man named Ed Stowell. And Ed was the head coach for the junior varsity at Harvard. He was a guy who went out of his way for me and took a chance. And he really allowed me to learn something that I think many of others might not have had the patience for. And the second coach was a guy named Al Bashian. So, Al was the "jumps" and "throws" coach. And one of the very interesting things about that time was that the physicists, and he was one of them, felt that women were not going to be able to pole vault. And women, in fact, at that time, didn't compete in pole vault and essentially weren't allowed into the sport. And there was a rationale that they had, which was that with a lower center of gravity a woman would not be able to pole vault because she would have to be disproportionately strong in her arms in order to invert. And it turns out that that was just absolutely incorrect. It's just ridiculous because women are pole vaulting now higher than most of us male athletes did when we were in college. It's so interesting to me that the paradigms of the day and some of the biases and norms and frankly, prejudices were a barrier to women pole vaulting. And I'm very thrilled today that we have more social justice around this. And in fact, some of my greatest heroes today are women who compete in the pole vault, who are my age and older. There are many of them, I see them at World Championships, at Masters Competitions, and there are women who were told that

they could not pole vault when they were young, and then took it up in middle age, or even perhaps as grandmothers, and they are the bravest and best of all of us.

Don Yaeger

I love that. I mean, that's the beauty of sports in my mind, if we're willing to be open to it, there's amazing things there that can help us can find new places to go.

Dolf Berle

For sure and enter the legendary stories of great track and field athletes like the relationship between Jesse Owens and Luz Long, who I get choked up just thinking about it, actually. But Luz Long was a white German, who I think may have even been a part of the Nazi Party. But he became a friend of Jesse Owens, because of their competition together in the long jump in the Olympics, that was over in Germany. So, Jesse Owens, of course, a remarkable hero to so many of us, but Luz also found his better self through sports.

Don Yaeger

Yeah. In Vaulter Magazine about self-doubt and frustration and its role as you stand at the end of the runway and how you have to overcome that before you can actually take off to become special. And so, I'm just wondering what has pole vaulting taught you about mental strength?

Dolf Berle

When I think about pole vaulting, I think about practiced courage. It is an everyday effort to practice being braver than your instincts want you to be. And, so when you're at the end of the runway with a big long pole that's fairly stiff, the way to pole vault well is to run as fast as you can and plant the pole as hard and as high as you can, and then you have to get upside down and trust that you have enough speed and enough power. Because if you don't do all those things, you will be rejected, and you'll go fairly high into the air and be thrown backwards back onto the runway or onto the ground. And that's fairly dangerous. It takes a huge amount of commitment and a real mental commitment to

totally put yourself into a situation that demands utmost effort and also demands great courage in the moment. So, what it teaches you is that you have to decide to be brave before you start, and then in the moment you have to execute against that and keep interfering thoughts that might relate to fear or doubt, you have to keep them at bay. And if you practice that over and over again, you actually become better and better at it. And so, to me, pole vaulting is about practiced courage and -

Don Yaeger

Being braver than your instincts.

Dolf Berle

Yes, to be braver than all of your very good instincts. Such as don't run fast towards something dangerous and don't turn upside down, because you want to land on your feet. But it takes all of that mentally to do your very best and that's what I really love about it.

Don Yaeger

I love too that you continue to find athletic success, right? You're currently ranked number one. You're the number one ranked decathlete in the USA for your age group. Your number two in the world in the decathlon in 2019. You're that rare CEO that I know who continues to compete at that world class level while running an enormous business. Why do you continue to compete?

Dolf Berle

Well, I think I have to tell you why I started competing again to really answer that question. So, I stopped competing as a competitive athlete in, roughly, 1986. I competed a little bit at the University of Zimbabwe after I had finished my time as a Harvard undergrad. And then I didn't compete again until I was 38 years old. And there were a couple of things going on in my life at that time that propelled me back into being a competitive athlete. The primary one was that my first son, Bax, he was diagnosed with autism. And this was emotionally shattering for our family. Because at that time, the prognosis for someone diagnosed with autism was very grim. We were told he would likely never

talk and never be potty trained. And, so I realized that I would have to be strong for the fight that would last likely my whole lifetime... the remainder of my lifetime and beyond. And so, I thought really hard about where I could find strength to do that. And what I found was that my dreams and identity and the times that I had felt strongest was when I was competing, and when I had an identity as a decathlete. Because if you're a decathlete you thrive on overcoming obstacles and adversity. And so, I got back into Masters athletics at roughly age 38 and decided that I would be as disciplined as I could about that training in the early morning because I had lots of other commitments. And it gave me access to strength and also joy, because I... Actually, I have a little post-traumatic stress still about that time in my life because, as I think back on it, it was just such an intense time, particularly as it related to my son. And so, since that time, I've been training to be a decathlete and a pole vaulter. And it's been a remarkable journey, I had the chance to, at age 40, come in second in the world in the in the pole vault and then I was fourth in the decathlon. And then, again later at 50 I won the world championship in the pole vault and I was third in the decathlon. And then at 55 I won again, as a pole vaulter. And so, for me, it's become a way of life and an identity and a source of strength and joy that allows me to do a lot of other things in my life. And I should say that I'm very happy to report that my son is doing so much better than any expectations we had. And so that, I think, is really a function of my great wife, and as much effort as I could put in to be disciplined and steadfast and persistent and help him as much as possible. And today he's actually a basketball coach and he's coaching Special Olympics teams and doing it with remarkable passion and great skill.

Don Yaeger

I love that, you and I have shared many stories. We have that in common and I love the continued support you give him and to the autism community. You serve as an inspiration to many of us, myself included in that area.

Dolf Berle

Well, I admire you I know your son is doing, I think pretty well as well. And it's great that we can have community for the journey that our sons are on.

Don Yaeger

Yeah, you mentioned this window: So, you're entering the idea of re-engaging in competition at 38. It's obviously very personally driven and thank you for sharing that. You basically spent the last 20 years in C-level roles, right? While also doing this...How has one benefited the other?

Dolf Berle

Well, I think that I have always performed best when more and more discipline was required in my life. And so, discipline around training and intensity around that and the importance of understanding and the constant reminder that you need a coach and you need coaching from friends and people you admire. And also, I would say that being a competitor and competing is itself a skill. So, when I was not competing, which was essentially between age 26 and 38, something was missing. You would sort of remember the great competitive moments that you'd had, and you try to draw strength from them. But if you're actively competing, and you're pointing towards your next competition in life, there is an edge that you have and a clarity and a state of mind that actually carries over into everything else that you do. So, one of the things that I would say is, when you're an active competitor, the colors in your life are brighter, and like the music is more awesome. And everything is just crisper and sharper. And so for me, having that in my life in a way that I appreciated and can share it with other people is something that I bring in terms of spirit and what I how I want to live each day into all my professional meetings and professional relationships.

Don Yaeger

I love that, "There's an edge and a clarity that carries over into all the other things you do." That's so well put. "Colors are brighter..." Thank you. That's awesome, and it's exactly what we're trying to encourage here, is an understanding that there is a direct relationship between being able to be your best in the C world, right? In the competitive world as well. So, thank you. But then you did American Ninja Warrior... right? You competed in two seasons, but tell me about that experience and why American Ninja Warrior?

Dolf Berle

Well, I loved watching the show with my family. And the stories were so fantastic. And the whole idea that life is about overcoming obstacles, was something that really resonated with me, particularly as you get older and there's more adversity in life. And I noticed that some of the finest competitors were women who were pole vaulters. And, so I said to myself, "Wow, so there's carry over, clearly, between being a pole vaulter and being an American Ninja Warrior." And at the time that I applied, and I think 77,000 people apply, and they only choose about 700 and the greatness of American Ninja Warrior as a competitor, is really the community. It's the people that you stand next to in line and their stories, because I realized as I listened to the men and women who were on either side of me in line that my story really paled in comparison to what they had been through and what inspired them to compete. I should say that I was not a very good American Ninja Warrior. I would have had to train a great deal more to be proficient at it. And so, it was very humbling. And I didn't make it past the third obstacle in each of my tries and I actually didn't make it on TV. So, people who look me up, I think you'll see that I was an American Ninja Warrior, but you won't see video of it, which is sort of a gift in a way... If I might say. But the big lesson is, if you can find joy in doing something hard, that's a pretty good life. Because it's very difficult those obstacles, they're very difficult. They're very intimidating, particularly in person, they're much bigger than they look on TV. And in some respects, pole vaulting is that way, as well. And so, the big lesson for me is find joy in doing something hard. And then ideally, you also find a community of people who you can do it with, so that you can support each other. And that's something that you can really look forward to every week and every month, if you have that in your life.

Don Yaeger

Wow, I love that. So, I want to transition now a little bit into some of your executive leadership discussions and how some of what you learned there, has played its way in. And I'm wondering, building and creating a team and creating depth and some of these elements that are often the pain points of executives. How has your competitive background helped you as an executive leader?

Dolf Berle

In so many ways Don. Let me first say that one of the great aspects of sport is the concept of being in the zone. And those peak moments when you feel like you're really at your best and it's almost a religious experience. Because your body and your mind are totally in sync with what you're doing. And so the specific conditions that you try to create as a leader and a manager around that are really clear goals and immediate feedback. You want people to be engaged but not overwhelmed. You want them free from distractions, and you don't want them to be worried about failure, because you want them to be brave, and to be able to execute a plan. And so, for me, all of the aspects of trying to be in the zone as an athlete and the conditions that are required translate directly over into what kind of a leader do you want to be to get the most out of people. And if all of those conditions are ones you can create, you will get a great outcome as a businessperson. And people will be joyful while they're working. Here's an example: So one of the moments I will never forget, in my business career was right when 9/11 happened. So at that point, you may recall that all kinds of things came to a standstill in terms of our nation. And that was true also for those of us running businesses. And we were worried about the people in our organization, we were worried for the country. We were worried about our P&L, right? What would happen to our business if the economy ground to a halt? And so a moment that I will never forget, was pulling the entire senior team of House of Blues together, and we had probably 14 of us in the room. And we, in the space of three hours, created a battle plan that was designed to ensure that we would reach our financial goals for the end of the year. And it took a whole lot of really incisive, deep thinking, and some courageous moves. And everyone had to dig really deep and do things they hadn't done before. And it was one of the most powerful sessions of my business life. And I say that because the people around me, were so focused and so in the game and such great teammates with each other. And in fact, we pulled it off we, we recovered everything that was going sideways for us as a result of that horrible tragedy. And we were successful. And so that would be just one example in my career where some of the concepts we've talked about here came to bear with a management team in a business.

Don Yaeger

And with that management team, is there any tip on sustaining that?

Dolf Berle

Yes, well, a crisis and also or also, a really peak experience is something that you can draw strength from for years and years after that fact. And so we were never the same team after that. We knew that we had the ability to rise to an occasion. We knew we could count on each other. We knew that even if we didn't have everything figured out, that we could figure it out if we had to. I really just try to be who I am, and transparent with our whole organization. And because I'm a bit older than most of the people who work for us, I'm happy enough to, if people ask, to share about what I do athletically, and about my son, and about different places I've lived and different things that have been difficult. And failures that I've had and different things that have added up to being able to do a job like this. So, in my mind, if you're a CEO, you just have to bring your whole person to it and you actually can't escape your whole person. So I just go all in on that and I realized that I'm not really defined by my title. I have a title but I'm much more defined by who I am and how I move through the world and how I interact with people and what we do - so that's what I'm focused on.

Don Yaeger

A couple of last questions here. One, you've obviously had success in both professional executive: what you're doing at Topgolf right now, the explosive growth, it's so impressive. You've had success, as we've mentioned, in the athletic space. Do you have a window on celebration or enjoyment of a high-level win? I'm just intrigued by that every time I get a chance to talk to someone of your caliber.

Dolf Berle

Well, in terms of a window, it's certainly the case in life that you should celebrate while the celebrating is good. Because there's only a short window when you can really celebrate something remarkable because then the rest of life goes on. So, I do think it's important to do that. I will say that the greatest joy that I have as a leader is really recognizing other people with their achievements. Because it is such

a pleasure to get in front of a group of people and talk about someone you admire, or a team that you admire, and tell their story and the aspects of their story that we can all learn from. So, recognition is actually a huge part of any company culture. And what you recognize and the stories you tell are the things that craft that culture and give people identity within that culture. Because really, that's my job.

Don Yaeger

Yeah. And then lastly, on this, just flipping that. There are also windows athletically, professionally, when we fail. When we don't hit the - I guess in executive sense, when you don't hit the bar, maybe in your athletic sense when you do hit the bar, right? How do you dissect the failure? Is there something that you would maybe share with us where maybe those two worlds have collided for you, where you've taken - you have some strategy around breaking down something that doesn't quite go right?

Dolf Berle

Well, first of all, I think it's important to take 100% responsibility when a failure occurs. If I get hurt, and therefore I fail, or if our team doesn't perform, and therefore we fail, or if I individually fail in some way, what I like to believe is there's a reason why. And so you try to go back and understand what it was about your preparation, or your mindset, or how you think about life and how things work and try to understand what it was that led to an outcome that you didn't want. By the way, I don't consider it a failure to lose if you're beaten by someone who is just so much better than you. I actually enjoy being in the company of people who are so awesome. And so with that, it's really just a question of what can you learn? Now what can you learn from something that didn't go well, that you can apply to the next situation where you hope to do better?

Don Yaeger

Yeah, balance is a huge issue. Whether you're student athlete, right? Whether you're a CEO trying to juggle roles as husband, father, your work with Make-A-Wish on the national board. Your work on the board of USA Track and Field... Anything you would offer to us, to me, about your work in balance and how you try to maintain that with all of those different things pulling at you?

Dolf Berle

Well, I think that the way to be the most balanced is to find real joy in the things that you do. And if you find enough joy in the different things that you do, then you will be able to do more. And of course, time management is important and all of those types of things. But for me, I try to think back to what I really wanted to be when I was like nine years old. And I think about the qualities and the type of life that I had hoped to have when I was that young. And then I compare that to what's happening today. And of course, you don't expect some of the adversity that you run into and everyone runs into when you get older. But I've always enjoyed being a competitor and someone doing sports. I was somebody who really also enjoyed things in the music and creative realm. I enjoyed being with other people and being on teams. And so I've really crafted an approach that involves trying to compete at a high level athletically, doing everything I can to support and help my family, and to be the best CEO that I can. And I recognize that that's probably narrower than a lot of other things I could be involved with. But if I focus on those three things, I really get a lot of joy and satisfaction out of it.

Don Yaeger

I've actually had a chance to be at a Topgolf facility with you, that wasn't a home facility for you and what you're doing at Topgolf right now, the explosive growth, it's so impressive.

Dolf Berle

We are in 25 countries and we have 20,000 plus people who work in the company. And our essential mission is to bring joy to the world and to transform a sport. And we do that through a combination of hospitality and technology. And so you might run into us in terms of our venues or top tracer, which you see on TV. We also have an online game called World Golf Tour where we have a number of different things we're doing. But it's a real blast to be able to be in this job at this time in this company, because we're growing like crazy. So, it's really a great ride.

Don Yaeger

I know you were killing it at Dave and Buster's, and it was really a lot of fun. And when you made the transition, I had the chance to read more about Topgolf and it has to be fulfilling for you to be there right now.

Dolf Berle

The most fulfilling part is seeing so many people, many of them, and these are all the people who work for us, many of whom really hadn't had much privilege in their background, by way of education or where they were born or the family they were in. And giving them careers where they can grow and blossom and be just awesome. And so I'm just really grateful for the people I work with and the opportunity we can provide for all of them.

Don Yaeger

And you're encouraging them to be brave.

Dolf Berle

So, I'll tell you a fun story. So in my office here, I have a whole bunch of Captain America golf balls, and I give them out to people. And I always write the same words I write, "You can be brave." And I sign it. And that's my special thing that I give to all the folks who might need that special ball at a certain moment. "You can be brave."

Don Yaeger

I love it. Well, Dolf once again. It's just an incredible gift that you've given to me, to us, to share perspectives and stories. And I love all that you continue to do on behalf of others. And I'm honored that you spent this time with us here today.

Wow what a vulnerable insightful discussion with Dolf Berle. I want to reflect on something Dolf mentioned that I hope you continue thinking about this week. He said, "I always perform best when more discipline was required in my life."

What about you?

As the level of discipline rises, do you?

I know it can be hard to hear but creating a routine that pushes you is not your supervisor's role, not your spouse's role, it is yours. And I want to help you do that.

If you are listening on iTunes, Spotify, or another platform, I encourage you to [check out our website](#) because I created a list of the best insights from this interview, including the five specific conditions Dolf uses to get his team in the zone and attached it in the resources section.

If you are on the go, no problem. Text NOTES to 58885-- that's five, triple eight, five-- and I will send you the link.

There are so many distractions in our lives that can decrease your productivity in an instant. I challenge you to set a schedule to train for your goals just as you would for your high school sporting event. For example, if you are trying to learn a new software, or another language, schedule practice time. Then, set a "competition date" to perform for a family member or friend.

I will leave you with one last line, and this one is my favorite: "Competing is itself a skill. When you actively compete, there is an edge that you have and a clarity and a state of mind that carries over into everything you do."

Dolf shows us how to be a great corporate competitor. Now let's go out and be great.. everyday.

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Stay in touch by connecting with me on social media @donyaeger on twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn!

Finally, are you a Corporate Competitor? Tell me the story about a time when your athletic experience taught you a leadership lesson you still use today!

Until next week... I appreciate you!