

Paralympic Athlete Lex Gillette On Finding Your Vision



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Lex Gillette

Paralympic Track and Field Athlete
for Team USA

Announcer:

Welcome to THRIVE, a Paychex Business Podcast, where you'll hear timely insights to help you navigate marketplace dynamics and propel your business forward. Here's your host Gene Marks.

Gene Marks:

Hey everybody and welcome back. So Lex Gillette is a globally recognized Paralympic Track and Field Athlete for Team USA. He competes primarily in the long jump. He has amassed five Paralympic medals, four World Championships, and he is the current World Record holder in the event. He's the only totally blind athlete on the planet to eclipse the 22 foot barrier in the long jump. Lex returned recently from Tokyo's 2020 Paralympics with a silver medal. And now has his sight set for Paris on 2024. Lex Gillette, thank you so much for joining me.

Lex Gillette:

Ah, thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. I'm glad to be here as well. I feel very intimidated. I mean, I can't do any of these things and I've got my full sight, but I guess you hear that from a lot of people.

Lex Gillette:

Yeah. Don't be intimidated. Don't be intimidate.

Gene Marks:

I am. I'm never going to get over this, but okay. Hey, let's talk. So the topic of this conversation is about overcoming obstacles. You speak and you write about this topic a lot. You know that our audience are small business owners. Talk to me a little bit about what you've learned about overcoming obstacles.

Lex Gillette:

Yeah, so, just to give a little bit of context. I'm blind now, of course, which you mentioned in the intro, but I was born with sight so I could see up until I was eight years old. And once I was eight, I started to experience retina detachments, which led to a string of operations that I had. In that one year alone, I had

10 operations to try and fix retina detachments, but after the last one doctor said that there wasn't anything else they could do to help my sight. So of course, that led to a number of challenges. And fortunately I had my mom and a host of individuals who helped me to transition my mindset at an early age.

Lex Gillette:

And so when we think about overcoming obstacles, I think a lot of it starts with our ability to shift our perception and our mindset, to look at something and to truly identify whether or not okay, is this really a limitation? Is this a barrier? How can I look at this situation and say, "Hey, how could I get over this? Is this really something that is holding me back? Or are there certain steps that I can take to get around that?"

Lex Gillette:

And so literally for me growing up, you think about that neighborhood where I spent a lot of my times, and I was used to seeing that neighborhood for the first eight years of life. And after losing my sight, it was, how can we teach this young child now to use other elements, other senses, other things so that he can navigate? And so I think that we look at obstacles and challenges as a whole, again, taking that same type of mindset, what sorts of adaptations can we make? How can we adjust and think of some creative alternatives, some things that we can tap into to still get to that destination that we want?

Gene Marks:

So where did you grow up, Lex?

Lex Gillette:

In Raleigh, North Carolina.

Gene Marks:

Got it. Okay. So you lose your vision at the age of eight. So you're basically in elementary school, which means you've got to make your way through middle school and high school, I guess. And you are completely blind. How'd you do that?

Lex Gillette:

Yeah, you know what, as a side note, you will never hear me at this point in life, you'll never hear me say that I lost my vision. I'll always make it very clear that I lost my sight, eyesight, et cetera, et cetera, because I feel like at that time I didn't necessarily have my vision. I feel like I acquired my vision later on in life. Now getting through school, I had a lot of accommodations. I had teachers that were visually impaired. People who were there to ensure that I had all of the resources that I would need. And so again, when we look at these obstacles and challenges that we face in life, sure, I can't read print books anymore, but I can learn how to read braille. And that was how I was able to access a lot of my textbooks.

Lex Gillette:

I also was introduced to technology at an early age. So using a computer with a screen reader on it, software that I can use to read and write emails, use word processors, surf the web, etcetera, et cetera. And again, that was opening my mind to a world of infinite possibility, so that whether it was academic, whether it was athletic, I always looked at a situation in the sense of, "Oh, well, these are some of the things that I've tackled in the past. How can I take that same type of knowledge and things that I've learned in previous situations to tackle what might be in front of me?"

Gene Marks:

We're talking about overcoming barriers. So, losing your eyesight is an enormous, just an enormous loss. And it really does create an enormous barrier for most people. Do you still get frustrated at that. Even now? I mean, when you look around at all the other people that are out there that don't have that specific barrier in front of them. How does that make you feel?

Lex Gillette:

Every time I step out of the front door each day, there's always something new and interesting that I feel I am overcoming. A lot of it at this day and age, it revolves around perception and mindset. The type of mindset that at an early age, my mom and other people told me that, "You are now a person who has a disability. And the reality is people are going to look at you differently because you do have a disability. You're blind. They're going to believe that you can and cannot do certain things. And they're going to believe that you should and should not do certain things, but we don't want you to be confined to what other people's expectations and opinions are. At the end of the day, you decide what you can do and no one else."

Lex Gillette:

We decide what we can do and no one else. And so, thankfully, I've been equipped with that type of mindset, because when you think about the challenges and things that I might have to deal with, or someone who lives a similar experience, it's a lot of perception and mindsets and people thinking that you can't do this. Or when we think about it in the context of business, it could be me walking into a job interview and maybe the interviewer or HR professional already has a certain type of viewpoint on me because I am blind. And maybe they're asking themselves questions around, "Is this person going to be able to do this job and complete these duties, etcetera, et cetera."

Lex Gillette:

And so those are the things that I would say are really frustrating because you would think that in 2022, we would have evolved greatly, which we have in a lot of areas. But when you think about the population of people who have a disability, there still are a lot of challenges and obstacles that we are facing. And I always say that our diagnosis doesn't disable us as much as society does.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. It depends on your point of view and what you think of yourself. You had mentioned about going in for like a job interview or any other type of challenge that a business has. Sometimes I think to myself, like if I was blind and I was going to do something, I'd be thinking to myself, "Well damn, I have such low expectations of this happening because of the obstacles that I'm facing that I can take even more risks." Do you know what I mean?

Lex Gillette:

Yeah.

Gene Marks:

Did that thought ever cross your mind, have you ever applied that in your life?

Lex Gillette:

I think that the funny thing is, if I do step into a new situation and say, I don't get the results that I want, internally, I would definitely feel a certain way. I would feel a little defeated because I'm always trying to excel and do well in any type of situation that I find myself in. However, from the outsider's point of view, if they see me fail at something, they're just like, "Oh it makes sense. He's blind. He can't see anything." So, you're able to get off the hook in that regards. But I hold myself to such a high standard that whatever situation that I go into, it's like, "Gosh, I'm trying to be the best at this and it didn't happen. But let me continue to work at it."

Gene Marks:

Sure. Your family seems like they provided a lot of support around you.

Lex Gillette:

Yeah, my mom. Yeah, for sure.

Gene Marks:

And what kind of support did she provide and who else in your life did you call upon or did you surround yourself with, to provide? You can't do these things on your own.

Lex Gillette:

Yeah, most certainly. So my mom, especially, she was there from the beginning, going with me to all of the doctors' offices, doctors visits and operations, et cetera. Support was that of a parent who is just insanely in love with their child and wants to see that they want to go and be successful in life. She wanted to expose me to so many different resources, programs, tools, technology, so that I would be able to see what was truly possible. She found someone to teach me how to read braille, how to use a cane, so I could navigate on my own. Found so many different pieces of accessible technology so that I would have access to things academically, and even within the rec and leisure space.

Lex Gillette:

When we talk about adaptive sports and rec, my teacher in high school was the one who introduced me to Paralympic track and field. And this was at a time where I could not see... I talk a lot about vision, being able to see things before they exist. And at that particular time, I don't know really what I saw within myself, but thankfully I had my teacher who saw something within me long before I saw it within myself. And through a fitness test that we had to participate in in high school, I discovered that I was one of the best standing long jumpers in the entire school. And from there, my teacher takes me down to the track and he shows me everything about the long jump and other events within track and field. And that is the day that we set out on this journey to become a Paralympian and win Paralympic medals, gold medals.

Lex Gillette:

So, the foundation was established at home. My mom is certainly one of those people where she's going to let the teachers and all of the counselors and professionals who I work with, let them know her expectations and the things that she implements within my life. And wanted to ensure that those individuals, who I would be spending the majority of my time with when I would get on the school bus and go to school, wanted to let them know that this is the type of environment that I want my son to have, because I feel like this is going to put him in the best position to go into the world and achieve the things that he wants to achieve.

Gene Marks:

How about fears, Lex? I mean, even today, you must be afraid of doing new things. You must have been terrified starting out in track and field without eyesight. I mean, I have full sight and I would be terrified. So, how did you overcome those and how are you overcoming those fears even now?

Lex Gillette:

Yes, correct. Definitely was extremely afraid in those beginning stages. But I think there's just something special about connecting with other people. You have these amazing human beings who are around us, and we find ourselves in these very daunting, overwhelming situations. And some people just are able to see the light at the end of the tunnel long before you can. And so, in those beginning stages, Mr. Whitmer, my teacher of the visually impaired, he was the one who really provided that vision. For someone like myself, who was afraid of twisting an ankle, running into something, falling down, injuring myself; he was that person who really opened my mind and painted a very vivid image of what could be. And that's the beauty of leaders, people who we connect with. They pave the way and allow us to see past our shortcomings or things that we might have believed were shortcomings.

Lex Gillette:

And, Mr. Whitmer, he was there, "Lex, we're on the long jump runway. It's about three feet wide. You have grass on either side of the runway. You don't have to worry about running into anything. The ground is flat. You're not going to fall off of a ledge or anything like that. I'm going to be standing at this distance in front of you. I'm going to be clapping and yelling straight, straight, straight, straight. So you know which direction to run. I just want you to run as straight as possible, as fast as possible to the sound of my voice and propel yourself from the takeoff board and land in the sand." And again, to have that person there who provides that voice, that direction, and that foundation, the person who empowers you, that gives you the confidence to maneuver down whatever stretch of track, figuratively speaking, that you are on. And between that genuine connection and leveraging that relationship, you're able to really catapult and soar into your destiny.

Gene Marks:

So in this short conversation that we've had, I mean, you are preaching the importance of building a good support system around you of, like you said, your family, your friends, your mentors, people to guide you along to whatever vision that you've chosen. You've mentioned about being adaptable and using things, even like technology, not being afraid to doing that kind of stuff, either if that's going to help you achieve your means. So you wrote a book called "Fly." In this book, you say, "Vision gives you strength. You see what can be, and maybe what you ought to be. Your focus shifts away from what's in your way to what lies beyond your current reality." And you write and you speak a lot, not about eyesight, but about vision and you help teach people to see. What does that mean, helping them to see? And how does that impact our audience, people running businesses?

Lex Gillette:

Oh, that's everything to me. And I have a slogan, no need for sight when you have a vision. For those beginning stages, when I had lost my sight, it was very difficult because in a lot of ways, we live in a visual world. But the one thing that I realized is that everything that we enjoy in this day and age, all of those things were nonexistent at one point. And the only place where they existed and lived, it was in someone's mind. And so I told myself that, you know what, if this really is the case and if vision is what it is, it doesn't matter whether or not I can see as long as I have this vision, that is the starting point.

Lex Gillette:

And just because you may see the vision and you have it, doesn't guarantee that you're going to experience those things. You still have to set a plan, connect with the appropriate people and then do everything in your power to bring that vision into fruition. And so when I think about as we step into the business space, we all need a vision. You all need to know where it is that you want to... That place, where you want to land, your destination. And so when you have that vision, that now sets the path for how you maneuver forward. Your vision helps to guide your actions daily. When you think about it from an athletic standpoint, it's like, "Oh, I want go to the Games. I want to win a gold medal. Then that probably means that I shouldn't be rolling up to this fast food restaurant and getting this burger and fries. Or I shouldn't be staying up until 3:00 AM, blase, blase, blah."

Lex Gillette:

When you think about it from the business standpoint, yeah. I want be the best business in this industry. And I want to take complete control and have the majority share of the market. So having that vision, what are the things that I need to do to ensure that we move closer and closer to that vision? So I think that, again, just going back to the sight, that reveals our current reality. Vision allows us to see past our current reality. And at the end of the day, the purpose for that book "Fly", I always wanted to leave something here. Because at the end of the day, sight ends at some point in time. We won't be able to see anymore. We won't be here anymore, but your vision, that can live forever.

Gene Marks:

Well in the last minute or so that we have, I just have to say, and I can speak of this from a standpoint of a 57 year old guy. Lex, your body is not going to last as long as you think it is. So, you've accomplished so much in track and field at the Paralympics and other competitions, but, at this point in your life, you talk about vision and you help people define their vision and how to stay focused on it. So I got to ask, what's yours?

Lex Gillette:

Yes. So I'm definitely going to compete in Paris in 2024.

Gene Marks:

Good.

Lex Gillette:

Beyond that. I want to continue to speak. So I do a lot of speaking for different companies and facilitate different workshops and experiential learning programs, which is absolutely amazing. I actually have another book that is coming out the latter part of this year, actually late summer. And it is entitled, "No Need for Sight When You Have a Vision." And the subtitle being, "What Blindness Can Teach Us About Risk and Leadership." So I'm really excited about that. And yeah, I just want to continue to connect with others and to do everything in my power to teach people, to see.

Gene Marks:

Lex Gillette, Paralympic Track and Field Athlete for Team USA, author, and speaker, and consultant as well. Lex, thank you much for joining me.

Lex Gillette:

Absolutely. Thank you.

Gene Marks:

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Announcer:

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