

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Transcript of an interview with

Peter Bol

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA - ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

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INTERVIEWER: Kristen Marano

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Kristen Marano

You said that during COVID, and during this time, you've actually had some young athletes join you on your training sessions, which I thought was great.

Peter Bol

Yeah. I actually did and I really enjoyed it. I think it helped me a little bit more as I think I've got to say that I was kind of struggling to train. As much as to help them train with an elite athlete, it actually helped me find passion back and then running all over again through COVID and stuff like that. So, it was a two-way thing. I enjoyed coaching them and giving them a glimpse of what an elite athlete does. And I think I'll learn a lot from them as well, but they don't really realise it and kind of keep them humble by not telling them.

Kristen Marano

What have you learned from them?

Peter Bol

Just, you know, just to enjoy it. They're just basically starting and they're starting it for one reason. They're just enjoying it. Cause once you get, I think, to the top you kind of forget to enjoy it a little bit more because you're more focused on competition. So, and they're just so carefree. So, I think the balance, like finding the balance in the middle is perfect.

Kristen Marano

Can you give us a glimpse into what some of those sessions have looked like?

Peter Bol

Yeah, so Thursday nights I was doing Hills and that was up in Perry Lakes and that was one of my toughest sessions. So, it did help to have guys with me and it would be like 400 Hills or something like that. So, it's pretty intense, pretty rough upper Hill. Sometimes two hundreds all the times three. And you're going up a Hill and your recovery is jogging back. So it adds up.

Kristen Marano

And how were you connected with these youth?

Peter Bol

Some I'm connected through when I used to live there that used to train with me. And that's social media, its great. I always get a lot of questions from athletes, 'What do you do for training?' And some of their parents wondering if someone can come watch you train and like, I mean, they don't have to watch, they can come and join.

Kristen Marano

You said that being an athlete is very much being a student.

Peter Bol

Yeah, I do actually believe that. And I'm learning that more and more. It's more than just training, super hard and there's a lot more to do. You know, there's recovery is important that such as like your sleep. Your mental state, you know, if you're not mentally there, that's also really important. So, there's a balance between your mind, body and spirit, and they kind of have to be in line to kind of compete at the highest level.

Kristen Marano

So what does that look like for you? If you cover all of those elements, how do you bring that into your training?

Peter Bol

Self-awareness, I think is really important. So, it's just about knowing yourself, physically, also having some accountability. So, I have my coach and, you know, great communication helps with that. And the physical part, if I feel too heavy and my body feels tired, you just communicate with your coach and instead of being de-motivated and don't want to go to training, your coach can be like, all right, let's change the sessions up. So you kind of freshen up mentally. I think there's a lot of reflecting, reading and knowledge, knowledge is key here. Because the more you know, the better it is. Say, I'm tired today, but I know I'm tired because of the sessions I've been doing or because I started tests and been studying, doing a lot of focus, then you're not too disappointed. But if you don't know that, that they kind of connect you'll end up disappointed. And I think, and spiritually, I think it's just being at peace with yourself and just being happy where you are.

Kristen Marano

And how do you kind of get there? I know you have a very positive mindset, but is that something you really need to practice? Or does that come naturally to you?

Peter Bol

I think you need to practice. Practicing a lot of gratitude and again, reflecting instead of what I don't have is like, 'What do I have?' you know? And I think at that time as well as really important to close in with people close to you. So, I always find a lot of inspiration just with my family. Just picking up a phone and calling them, it changes things up.

Kristen Marano

You mentioned that with COVID and the postponement of the Olympics that you were able to come back to Perth for two months and spend time with your family, with your brothers and sister.

Peter Bol

Yeah. I've got a pretty big family, so it's always pretty fun. My sister we're pretty close and I've got four brothers, so you can imagine it gets pretty competitive and yeah, it's just fun. It's always good being at home and just being around with family. I just love it. It's one of my top values and yeah, I just started keeping really close.

With my sister, we can do anything. She loves ice cream, so I love going out for ice cream and getting some food or going on bike rides and stuff like that. And then with my parents, they just, I guess they love scenery so anywhere they want to go just to switch off. And then my brothers, it really depends. It could be sport. It could be at the right time, partying and whatnot, you know, with the boys and stuff like that.

Kristen Marano

Where does the competitiveness come in?

Peter Bol

When we are playing FIFA, when you're playing video games, it gets pretty competitive.

Kristen Marano

Speaking with other athletes, a lot of them have said, obviously there's a lot of disappointment and you have to get your mind back on track. Can you tell me a bit more about that time for you?

Peter Bol

I feel like over the last five years, everything has been like, 'Go, go, go, go, go'. And it's finally like all right, stop. And then when you stop, you think you do a lot of thinking and like soul searching. Cause you just have the time. And during these times, like, I mean, it's not like I wasn't disappointed. There was no Olympics and no competition and things aren't as normal as there usually are. I just found a lot of peace in going back home for two months, being with family and also found a lot of peace in being in Australia for a bit longer. Because as an athlete, especially as a track and field athlete, we're always traveling. And it's nothing I'm complaining about, but sometimes it does, it adds up and you're out of your bed for so long. Last year I was out for four months or something like that. So it feels good. Just being home, in some way you can call home, a base.

Kristen Marano

You're very grateful to be Australian and to be competing for Australia. And you said you came to Perth when you were eight years old, but that your love for Australia keeps growing the more you travel.

Peter Bol

Yeah, it actually does. I love my identity and my background. And you know, my mom is Sudanese, my dad is South Sudanese, and I take a lot of pride in both of those. But I'm also as equally thankful to be here. The more I get to travel and see the world and through different lenses, the more I'm thankful for who I am today. Cause sometimes you just, you know, when you don't go and when you only know one place, then you know, you don't really know. For instance, Perth, I lived there for so long. It wasn't until like two years ago that I started traveling outside of Perth and visiting the whole of Western Australia that I was like, 'Wow,' it wasn't till I moved to Melbourne, that I was more appreciative of Perth.

Kristen Marano

What do you appreciate about Perth?

Peter Bol

The quietness, no traffic. Also down south, you know, the beaches are amazing and there's some good coffees. You just have to look for them. Good coffee.

Kristen Marano

You are writing a lot on your blog and you said you're starting a podcast, which is about sharing perspectives and being open and honest about some of the things that are going on in the world. Can you tell me a little more about what your motivation behind the blogging was and what you've been thinking about during this time?

Peter Bol

Yeah, it's just, it's basically just my experience. I think I was saying yesterday I learn a lot through other people's experience. So, it's a way of paying it forward. Um, I don't feel entitled. I feel like I have to do it. I actually do enjoy doing it and I do enjoy writing it cause a lot I don't share. So the ones I shared what I'm comfortable with and it's also really good to reflect on it. There's so many times I went back into my writing and it's like, well, you know, is brightens your day. Or, you know, if you're having a bad time, for instance, you look back, or it's not that bad, you've had worst time before that. And then you just kind of look at the records, you know, it's just, just like a library, I guess you can select a genre and go read whatever you want. And my life has different chapters. So I just look at whatever chapter I want to look at, which is cool.

Kristen Marano

Well, I suppose looking back on what you've written as well can show you a lot about how much you've grown as a person. When we write, we're also trying to sort of make sense of what's going on in our lives and trying to make sense of what's going on in our minds.

Peter Bol

And just understanding yourself. I think that's key, you know? Cause you're not trying to understand anyone else. You're just trying to understand yourself and, and only way if you ever wanted to help people is by understanding yourself first and helping yourself first, really.

Kristen Marano

Changing the narrative and thinking more positively about what's going on now. There can be a lot of negative stories and COVID and the Black Lives Matter movement sort of said that, you know, people will sometimes focus on the struggle, but to look at struggle as opportunity. And that seems very much how you've been growing up and how you're living your life, which I think is very admirable.

Peter Bol

Yeah, it's, it's definitely that. And you know, I think once you gain enough knowledge and experience, you do realise the struggle or all the hurdles and obstacles do make a bit part of your life. But they don't necessarily have to, you know, determine the rest of it. You know, you can take them for inspiration, you can take them to change the world or change

something, but they don't have to continually keep upsetting you and you can change it. And with the Black Lives Matter is it was great to see so many conversations happening around that. I really enjoyed seeing that cause it really just meant, at the end of the day, it meant that finally people have always had enough, but to be able to come and speak about it and try to find a solution, it was really cool to see. But also around that time, you know, COVID and everything, it does kind of add to your mental health. And that's what I was hinting on one of my blogs, if it's too much for you, it's okay to sit back a bit because you can only try to contribute and help when you're in the right mindset. And if you're on the wrong mindset, then you should, it should be okay to sit down and, and just try to learn more and observe and, and watch before you jump in. You know? So when you jump in, you are with a clear and head space.

Kristen Marano

Do you mean to sort be sitting with your feelings, just staying still?

Peter Bol

I think in stillness, if you sit still for a while, I think that's where solutions come, but sometimes that's what it requires to just sit still and, and actually trying to see what what's going on, you know, and I think there's a lot of value in just being able to sit still and, and see things. You might see that something's different that you might be missing before. And we tend to miss a lot of things when we're angry and emotional and whatnot. So if you can sit still and kinda just, you know, just relax, you might see something differently.

Kristen Marano

What are some of the things you do for yourself when you're not feeling physically, mentally, spiritually fit?

Peter Bol

I usually just, I usually just draw back to my values, you know? And as I said, one of my big values is family. So, if I'm feeling a bit down, I'll look into that and just try and speak to more family members. It's your values is what brings you joy. So, I think if you draw back to them, you can kind of find your way back.

Kristen Marano

I saw on one of your blogs, you were talking about resilience. What does resilience mean to you?

Peter Bol

Well, in basic terms, it's definitely the ability to bounce back. And when I do go into schools and do school talks and all of that stuff. I don't really focus on inspiring anyone. I just focus on be myself. But resilience in a way, if I was to put it into an example, I made an Olympic team within five years of starting athletics, of starting running, which is five years. Everyone's like, 'Whoa, that's, that's crazy.' And then, but what you don't know is within those five years, I've missed out on World Juniors. I missed out of the Commonwealth games. I missed out on World Championships. So, if I didn't have enough resilience, the first time I missed out, I would have never been back. And then I would have never been

back for the third time. So, to be able to miss all those and my first team to ever be outside Australia, to compete for the Olympics is huge. But you have to be really resilient to get there and to kind of accept that you're not, you're not good now, but you can get better. So it's just your ability and just to be able to bounce back and it comes with practice. So it's okay when you're not resilient. Because also within those five years I remember not winning a state championship or national championship because I dunno a super competitive, I thought in my first year of athletics, I was going to win a state championship or something like that. And I just didn't go back the next year. I just decided, I was like, 'No, I'm not going back because I lost.' So it also takes time to be resilient.

Kristen Marano

What sort of goals have you set for yourself now that you've got about another year until Tokyo?

Peter Bol

I haven't, actually. You reflected back on and re-evaluated my goals because I think if COVID has taught us anything is to focus on the present and I'm kind of enjoying that right now, just focusing on the present. But at the same time I do, you know, have just blurred visions of where I want to be in what I want to do, but more focused on the present. Cause I mean, if the Olympics don't happen, they might not happen. We're not guaranteed that. And COVID has proved that we're not guaranteed anything. So to put all of my energy into next year kind of makes no sense.

Kristen Marano

That's quite a different mindset. I haven't heard that from as many athletes. It is still very much focused on the Olympics and winning gold. Being present has been quite difficult for them.

Peter Bol

Yeah. I mean, I'm still training just as much and as good as I was last year and this year, I'm just deciding to, you know, I appreciate more today consciously.

Kristen Marano

I think an important part of these conversations that we're having is also sort of being a role model to youth and encouraging them to also keep going with what they love during this time. If you could share one thing from your journey so far within those five years leading up, what would be one sort of piece of guidance that you would give?

Peter Bol

I think I was kind of struggling through school to pick something because you know, you're so close to your friends at school and, and you want to go where they want to go. I think the only tip is really you can still be friends with people, you don't have to follow their passions, just follow yours and you know, it will lead you to different paths, but you guys, if the friendship is strong enough, you'll still remain there. So just follow your own path. You never know where it may take you as long as you enjoy it, even if it doesn't take you

anywhere, if you're doing it because you're enjoying it as a lot better than doing something that you're not enjoying and you're good at it.

Kristen Marano

Absolutely. Well, one of the things that you've been doing, uh, as well as, um, being an athlete is studying construction.

Peter Bol

Yeah I did Construction Management at Curtin. I actually worked for an engineering company for a year, and again, that might be mixed messages. I really enjoyed working in the construction industry and working as an estimator and doing cool projects. And I also enjoyed athletics, but if you actually want to be really top in sports, you know, you have to kind of limit your focus. So it's okay to be fully passionate about multiple things, but maybe choose the time where you're gonna focus on each one, because focusing on both of them was almost too hard too impossible. I mean, I was working on projects and then I was trying to disappear from the country for a few months. It doesn't really work out.

There's sacrifices and there's good and bad sacrifices. You know, sometimes you have to sacrifice things you enjoy too. It's just, you have to, I guess, measure which one you want to do it more.

Kristen Marano

So many people link their identity to their sport. You come out of it and then you're like, 'What do I do now?' And we all have skills and we all have things that we're good at. It's staying connected to that throughout the process.

Peter Bol

It does help you, especially say for instance, when you're injured and you can't run anymore or something like that. And all I could do is cross training. It's good to be able to have something else that you can, that you're passionate about, that you can focus on and switch on. So, you're not just thinking and thinking about not being able to do sports anymore and sport does actually give you great opportunities to build other interests too, cause you spend so much time recovering. So there's a lot of opportunity to learn such as reading, learning a language and being creative. You know, there's a lot of room for creativity.

Kristen Marano

You said, 'Sport means to me that I can access opportunities that otherwise I wouldn't have...testing my limits both mentally and physically and has shaped me to have the courage and tools to make a difference in the quality of life.'

Peter Bol

I think if I wasn't running, this decision that when I went to school on a basketball scholarship and athletics, I mean, I never thought athletics was a sport. I mean, who wants to run around for fun? It just sounds crazy. So I was at school for a basketball

scholarship and we had to run, it was compulsory and I won at school for two years and one of my teachers, she tried to convince me to start running. And I said, no way, I'd rather keep playing basketball. And actually I wasn't convinced until I was 11. So I didn't even start until I was 11. But that single decision to say yes has meant I travelled the whole world. Cause I don't really think, I mean, we'd never know, but I don't think I would have travelled as much as I have. And I wouldn't have learned as much as I have she's from that single decision to be able to. And the following year I was flying over Australia, checking out different places and that's where you gain motivations. Like you see where you could be and then you come back, you work harder and you can go somewhere else. So, it opens up to other opportunities.

I feel like we're always kind of afraid. I think mental strength is just like physical strength. And I know as an athlete, I can't be physically fit all the time and also know I can't be mentally fit all the time. You know, there's sometimes you're just not mentally fit. So then it's your responsibility to put things in place, you know, and to know, sometimes I'm okay with being physically unfit, but to be mentally unfit and to be okay with it. I think it does more damage. So you're going to bridge that gap and that's what I do.

Kristen Marano

How is life in Melbourne right now? When did you return?

Peter Bol

I've been here for a month I think now. It kind of sucks, but it's not the worst. I keep saying, cause the lockdown, but I'm never really doing anything. I think the only thing I really miss is, one I'm never here during winter. So I miss the sun two, I miss walking into a cafe and being able to sit down and eat. So other than that, I'm still training as normal and everything else. And then tomorrow we have to wear masks. So that's a bit different, but again, yeah, I think it's okay.

It's strange. It's strange to be driving around. I drove to Caulfield, which is a 45-minute drive in the 30-something minutes is strange to see like, 'Nope, not much cars on the road' and it's just different vibe. It's just kind of feels off.

Kristen Marano

I don't think anyone's wearing masks here in Perth. I haven't really seen it. I think it's just very different, different reality being in a place that's a little more spread out.

Peter Bol

Yeah and we have a massive population compared to everyone else as well. So it makes sense. Melbourne and Sydney will suffer the most at the end of the day.

Kristen Marano

Is there anything that sort of stands out to you you're noticing about yourself during COVID?

Peter Bol

I think just to share more because I think more people appreciate it because they've been through it. If you can be honest with yourself, people can relate more to you. And I mean, it was never a goal. Not to be honest with yourself, it was just being honest with other people to be okay, like, random people. Because you're on this platform and people are gonna, you should hold yourself accountable. Like, I mean, if all I'm posting is all the good times and similarly with athletics, if all I'm posting all the sessions, I'm doing all the racing and not the sessions, then people will think, Oh, it's kind of, you know, you're a freak of an athlete, but if you post your whole progress little by little, they can kind of see, maybe it's actually possible. He's worked for this much this much. And they've known the background story. Then people would actually probably respect it even more because they've seen that and maybe not quit so early.

Kristen Marano

I think a lot of people can look at athletes or anyone accomplishing great things in their life and say, 'How do they get there?' or, 'I could never do that.'

Peter Bol

Yeah. So just being able to share that, I think it would be, it was great value.

Kristen Marano

I think it's important to bring up that sometimes people approach your story, you know, being born in Sudan and then coming to Australia. They want to hear almost that side of the story versus you saying, 'Well, you've come here and this is your life now.'

Peter Bol

Yeah. It's almost like it's tragic, but really, I don't think people should be seen as a refugee or a migrant, or something like that. It should, it's almost like a trophy. Like it's your identity is where you come from. And if people always want to, if people want to associate it with bad things, then I mean, yes, there's the bad things and there's the bad struggles, but who doesn't go through bad struggles and whatnot? We have people in Australia that go through some terrible things too. And I think it's better if we have a better conversation to get to know the person instead of the assumptions, you know? Cause I mean, there's so many articles or even Wikipedia says that I came from a refugee camp, but I've actually never been in a refugee camp, but whoever wrote that, and it's nothing I'm upset about, but whoever wrote that, if they could have had a better conversation instead of assumptions, they would get more value out of that. I think they would have got a better story.

Kristen Marano

You're saying that they've assumed that you were in a camp?

Peter Bol

Yeah. It's just easy to assume.

Kristen Marano

Yeah. I suppose it's asking questions with more curiosity?

Peter Bol

And wanting to actually learn. Yeah. I think questions to learn rather than to write a story. I think then you write a better story.

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