

The ultimate coach-athlete relationship: Team McKillop has golden touch in overcoming adversity

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Michael McKillop



A GOLDEN YEAR: Michael McKillop celebrates winning the men's 1500m T37 final in the Olympic Stadium at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games

- **Michael and Patrick McKillop share the inspirational inside story of their father-son coach-athlete relationship.**
- **Northern Ireland sporting hero Michael has cerebral palsy and epilepsy and has had to overcome multiple personal and sporting challenges on his road to glory.**
- **With his dad at his side every step of the way, they disclose how they have conquered every hurdle, forging a formidable, unbreakable double act.**
- **Their story is essential learning for coaches of disabled athletes who aspire to become Paralympians.**

We were treated to both royalty and sporting royalty at this year's [UK Coaching Summit](#) in Northern Ireland.

There was a surprise special guest appearance by UK Coaching patron Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, the Princess Royal, who addressed the 200 delegates on the opening morning.

Sadly, Rory McIlroy's appearance at the glorious Slieve Donard Resort & Spa was only fleeting. His unexpected cameo lasted the length of breakfast before he hit the famous links at the neighbouring Royal County Down Golf Club just a few steps from the hotel.

But it was the appearance of four-time Paralympic gold medallist Dr Michael McKillop and his 'biggest fan', dad Patrick, his coach from the age of 12, that will surely live longest in the memory.

Delivering their keynote speech together for the first time, the pair took us on an emotional journey, charting the multiple hurdles Michael has had to overcome en route to the top of his sport after being diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of

two.

Michael's personal reflections demonstrated the important role resilience and willpower plays in triumphing over adversity, but the presentation also helped elevate the importance of the coaching profession, as Patrick explained with passion and professional precision how he has adapted training around Michael's disability.

The result was a presentation laden with valuable life lessons but also a quintessential lesson in elite coaching, covering the importance of the [coach-athlete relationship](#) (and the father-son relationship), positive role models, team-work and togetherness, planning and preparation, trust and respect, psychology and [technology](#), and so much more.

The early years

'If I didn't have a coach I wouldn't be successful,' said Michael succinctly, before hailing the unconditional love and unrelenting support of his [parents](#).

This rather exceptional and wonderfully effective [parent-athlete-coach](#) triad was instrumental in developing in Michael the personal qualities – such as a [growth mindset](#) – that would enable him to live the life he wanted to lead.

Without such positive role models – instillers of belief and passion – every hurdle encountered (and there have been many) would have felt more like clearing a pole vault obstacle than your regular 110m variety.

'Automatically as parents you think of the worst,' said Patrick on being told by a consultant that their son had [Cerebral Palsy](#) and was disabled.

Michael's parents were fiercely determined to give their son as many opportunities as humanly possible.

'You can either accept it – box him off, he can't do it, he's not able, he's different – or take steps to change that.

'As parents that's what we did. We wanted our son to be the best that he can be, not necessarily in sport but in life.'

Patrick McKillop

Patrick and Michael chart the emotional journey of their father-son coach-athlete relationship

Another mountain to climb

Sport became Michael's physiotherapy.

Hurling sticks, cricket bats and golf clubs were only ever an arm-width away in the McKillop household, and with a large garden and two older sport-loving sisters, and parents who had both represented Ireland as junior athletes – his mum was

fourth in the first ever Belfast marathon, aged just 18 – the desire to emulate their achievements became rooted at an early age.

Motivation and inspiration were never in short supply. Sadly, personal challenges also came thick and fast.

In 2004, aged 14, Michael had his first epileptic fit while on holiday.

Patrick admits he was struck by blind panic after finding Michael on the floor of his bedroom having a seizure.

‘That image of seeing him on the floor with his head wedged between the bed and the bedside cabinet, in a fit – the memory will live with me to my dying day.’

This second distressing diagnosis was all the more challenging, and terrifying, because Michael was still only a child.

‘My epilepsy happens in my sleep, with no one around me. Growing up as a kid, I was petrified, knowing I could go to sleep and never wake up,’ he explained.

It was another mountain to climb, but the McKillops were undaunted, and a year later, Michael signalled his arrival on the international scene.

Aged just 15, he won two senior level silver medals at the European Championships in Finland, on his Ireland debut, and then clinched his first world title the following year – breaking the 800m world record in the process.

There would be no looking back.

Skip forward to the present day, and Michael is now one of Ireland’s most successful ever elite sportsmen; a Paralympic great, seven-time world champion and multiple world record-holder at 800m and 1500m.

A coaching plan that’s pure gold

So what is the secret behind this phenomenally successful father-son coach-athlete relationship? What lies at the heart of the Team McKillop [philosophy](#)?

Patrick detailed the coaching doctrine that has served the double act so well, unveiling his list of key attributes that he believes is prerequisite to success at the highest level of any sport.

‘First and foremost you have to be a role model,’ he explained. ‘It’s about setting the right standards, and it helps that I’ve walked the walk. I wouldn’t ask anybody to do anything that I wouldn’t do myself.’

‘Secondly, you have to be an educator. Luckily I work in the world of teaching (Patrick is a PE teacher and has led athletes to regional, national and international titles), so it comes naturally.’

‘You have to give them the skills. It’s nice that you are able to demonstrate it so they can see it and appreciate it. Let them know what’s right, what’s wrong and, more importantly, how to fix it.’

But the crux of being a coach, said Patrick, is knowing your athlete, as, with no exceptions, everyone you work with will be different.

‘Coaching is about [relationships](#); it’s how you interact with people; it’s about mutual respect. Through building a good [rapport](#) with people you will get more out of them. How you cajole, how you coax, how you push – that’s where the torture element of being a coach comes in.’

Walking a tightrope

Ah, ‘torture’ – or, rather, ahhhh torture! This is an eye-catching addition to Patrick’s ‘compulsory’ list and it is crucial the coach dispenses hurt appropriately or you risk damaging the health and hunger of your athlete.

As an elite level coach, you will at certain times need to inflict pain as you strive for incremental performance gain. A form of tough love that will bear fruit in the long term, severe exhaustion and nausea in the short term – with Patrick joking: ‘Michael doesn’t discriminate. Whether it’s tartan, tarmac or grass, he loves to revisit his dinner!’

‘Every athlete has different pressure points and different buttons you can push,’ added Patrick. ‘You need to know how far you can push each of them.’

That means a series of delicate decisions for a coach, but when you consider Michael’s trigger for his seizures is fatigue, this places an added element of concern and pressure on Patrick. ‘It is a balancing act,’ he said. A high wire one at that.

The crux of coaching

Another characteristic Patrick regards as being incumbent in a good performance coach is having a good understanding of [psychology](#).

You must be a [performance analyst](#), he explained, having to cast a critical eye on your athlete's performance and at times telling them unequivocally things they will not enjoy hearing, and showing them evidence to vindicate your assessment – such as using [video technology](#) to critique technique.

And that means being psychologically astute, with a good grasp of [emotional intelligence](#) to steer a smooth course through occasionally choppy waters.

‘Sometimes it doesn't go to plan and you need to know when to give a kick up the backside and when to put the proverbial arm around the shoulder.’

Preparation and planning must be taken to the nth degree, and perfecting certain performance training elements can be a decade long process.

For example, as a hemiplegic – with a deficiency down his right side – Michael runs with his right hand in a locked claw position. Another adverse impact of his disability is spasticity in his right leg, meaning an inflexible Achilles tendon.

Patrick and his strength and conditioning coaches must work to overcome this weakness by re-establishing new movement patterns in his brain.

To build strength and to give him the power to push off on the toes of his right foot when racing, Michael has had to repeat the same painful exercises in training thousands and thousands of times. No exaggeration.

‘It's repetition, repetition, repetition to establish muscle memory,’ said Patrick. ‘After 12 years of drills, it has become autonomous.’

‘Now, I can only get that out of him if he wants to compete and step out of his comfort zone. And that's where the relationship comes in again – the crux of coaching – being a motivator, an inspirer.’

McKillop collage

Best dad in the world

There are more subtle skills required, like being a personal assistant, bag carrier, even shoe-lace tier, and, once he became a world champion, travel agent and media director.

Forensic attention to detail is crucial, as is the need to be an innovator.

‘This is a massive part of the role in any sport: to keep abridged of what is happening in your sport. Don’t live in a cocoon and plough your own furrow, draw on the expertise of others.’

But perhaps Patrick’s two most important roles are being a father – ‘Ultimately I’m still his [dad](#), and the one he hopefully turns to when he needs advice’ – and his greatest fan.

And the feeling is mutual, as Michael was at pains to point out.

As the presentation drew to a close, Michael – Paralympic gold medal from Rio 2016 in his hand – thanked father for the pivotal role he has played in his career and his life. And he had this closing message for those assembled in the hotel’s Grand Ballroom:

‘I may be the one that stands up on the podium listening to my national anthem, but do you know who the person is that deserves this medal? My dad. Now I’m going to put it round his neck because he should know that I appreciate every single thing he does for me, as a son and as an athlete. Now I want everyone to stand up and congratulate him on winning a Paralympic gold medal.’

With the stage doubling as the podium in this Rio re-enactment, and the applause ringing out from the crowd, it was a golden moment for Patrick to cherish.

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Further reading

- [How coaches can remove participation barriers for those with cerebral palsy and other disabilities](#)
- [Meet the coach of the England cerebral palsy football team](#)
- [Coaching cerebral palsy football and putting a positive spin on disabled sport](#)

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