

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 383: MELISSA STOCKWELL

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you build teams of high performing people -- because organizations don't disrupt, people do.

We all have an idea of what we want our future to look like. Maybe it's very grounded, and concrete - or maybe it's just a vague idea of how we want to feel when we get there. These hopes are what get us out of bed. It's a vision that belongs to us.

But what happens when we're forced to adapt that vision? Maybe the company you work for folds, or your apartment floods - something out of your control gets between you and your dream. How do we muster the strength to find another way through?

In 2004, Melissa Stockwell had a clear vision of her future--a lieutenant in the U-S Army. But when a roadside bomb in Baghdad took her left leg, the door to that dream slammed shut. What now? But jumping ahead 20 years, on September 1st, 2024, Melissa will compete in Paris in her fourth paralympic triathlon. That's running, biking, and swimming, back-to-back to back. Her motivational speeches have inspired rooms full of people. And her non-profit, Dare2Tri, is giving other disabled athletes resources so they can run toward their dreams.

What can we learn from Melissa, and her journey - from that Baghdad hospital, to the Paralympic podium?

I hope you enjoy.

**Whitney Johnson:** I want to start in 2005. Walter Reed Army Medical Center. At this point, you have your prosthetic. It's been a little under a year since you lost your left leg. A spokesman for Paralympic athletes John Register, I love that name, was there talking that morning. And this became the launch point for one of your biggest s-curves. Tell us what happened, what you were, what he said, what you were thinking, what you were feeling.

**Melissa Stockwell:** Oh my gosh, that day did. Absolutely. It kind of changed my life. So yes, I was a year, not quite a year or a few months after losing my leg, kind of unsure what I was going to do with my life. And I'd always been an athlete with two legs and would kind of lay there in my hospital bed wondering, can I still be an athlete? Can I still feel, you know, the thrill of a finish line and the sweat on my face? And I got into this room with John Register and he sat there and he has this booming voice and he's like talking to all of us newly wounded veterans, if you train hard enough and dedicate yourself to a sport, you can compete on the world's biggest athletic stage as somebody with a disability at the Paralympic Games and represent your country. And as a young gymnast, I had dreamt of going to the Olympic Games. So here I was kind of like, oh my gosh, like, I have this second chance. And it kind of just, um, yeah, I left that room kind of having this new dream, this new goal.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh. It's beautiful. I got chills when you were telling the story. And this has been, like, 20 years. That's amazing,

**Melissa Stockwell:** I know, I know.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, your very first Paralympic Games, it's not that many years after. I mean, it's like four, three years later, you go, which is astonishing. Miraculous. In Beijing, you leave empty handed. Everyone wants to be that first time wonder can, although in my book, the fact that you were even at the Olympics is a wonder kind. But anyway, what did those games feel like? And I guess what emotions were you having? Positive and negative.

**Melissa Stockwell:** So, it was, I was a Paralympian, right? So, I had on that team USA uniform. I was representing a country I had defended over in Iraq. And, you know, I had worn a military uniform, and now I'm wearing the uniform of our country to compete. And so different, yet similar. And then but nobody goes to the Olympics or the Paralympic Games wanting to be mediocre. You want to like; be the best athlete you can be. You want to be on that podium. And that didn't happen. I was I didn't do well athletically. So, at the end of, you know, the biggest meet of my life, I got this participation medal, which I wanted to, you know, throw out the window at the time. But looking back now, I realized that was such a part of the journey. You know, it's kind of like that was yes, I was a Paralympian, but I kind of had, you know, unfinished business and wanted to go back and see what I could do. So, looking back, as much as that was really hard at the time, and I just felt like I had let everyone down, that was kind of its kind of, you know, looking back and seeing that and just knowing that that was part of it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Interesting. Do you, do you now, in retrospect, have this thought of you didn't, you would have in some ways almost peaked too early. And so, I mean, I guess what meaning of it do you make now around that?

**Melissa Stockwell:** You know, I think just really the learning part of it, learning then that, you know, you want the medals, you want to be on the podium, you want to do well, but like, it's sometimes it's about the journey to get the journey to get someplace that like, means even more. So, I think I was able to really recognize and learn that in that moment. And that's kind of helped me with, with my life as I've gone on. And, yeah, I think looking back, that's just kind of how it was supposed to happen.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Okay. All right. So, jumping ahead today, this is going to be your fourth Paralympics event. For our listeners and for me, can you describe what a para triathlon entails and how the classification system works?

**Melissa Stockwell:** Yes. So, it's very confusing. I'm in it and I still get confused by it sometimes. So, in the Paralympic Games. So, every sport has its own classification system, which basically means that, so for example, in triathlon, I, there's five different disability classifications and I am in the severe leg impairment classification.

So, I only compete against those that have severe leg impairments. And to get into that classification, you go in front of this med board, and they do, you know, they go based off a doctor's notes and range of motion and limb loss and they kind of take all these things into account and put you in the correct disability classification. So, the classifications differ for every sport. And, you know, sometimes it doesn't seem like it's always fair, but you have to kind of group people together because you can't just have, you know, three people competing. You want like a whole field. So, they try to make it as fair as they can. So, in triathlon, I'm in the severe leg impairment. It's denoted PTS2 as my classification. But so, we all have a lot of amputations above the knee. Some might have impairments on both sides. And then we all do the same sport. So, we swim a half a mile, we bike a 20 K which is about 13 miles. And then we run a 5K, which is 3.1 miles. So, it's all about speed and as fast as you can and trying to get it all, get it all done fast.

**Whitney Johnson:** You're like just get it done. Okay. So, I'm thinking running, I'm thinking biking. Those are their own challenges. But swimming seems like totally different. A completely different beast. What was it like when you first got in the pool? Like the early experiences of getting in the pool?

**Melissa Stockwell:** So, any other swimmers, if you're a swimmer or swimmers that are listening, might agree that the water has this kind of healing effect. And for me, I would get in the water, I almost forgot, as though I didn't have a leg. It kind of just had this like natural feeling of making me feel whole. And I love, I randomly loved the smell of chlorine, like it just kind of worked out as I was learning to swim again, I learned about the Paralympics. I was like, oh, I'm going to give this a shot in the sport of swimming. So, it all just kind of, you know, made sense. And I still love the water. I love the way it makes me feel.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, even though it was something new for you, actually, that's the place that you feel the most whole.

**Melissa Stockwell:** I do. Yes. And still, I mean, I'm in the water, you know, five days out of the week, just with training leading into Paris, and it's, yeah, I just, I love it. I mean, some days are better than others, but for the, for the most part, I just, I truly enjoy it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. All right. So August is fast approaching. So, you've got these Olympic medals. You've got I mean; you now have a track record of like literally a track record. And how are you approaching training potentially different than you have in the past?

**Melissa Stockwell:** I think so the older I get. So, I'm one of the older ones in my competitive field. So, I'm 44. I'm a very proud 44-year-old. I'm a mother.

**Whitney Johnson:** Well done.

**Melissa Stockwell:** And a lot of, a lot of my competitors, it's very different. You know, I'm married, I have kids, and they're not married, no kids. So, it's just a very different kind of mentality, I think. So, the older I get, the more I know my body. I know, like, weekly training, what I can handle, what I can't. I know that I might need more recovery than my other teammates who are, you know, there are ten years younger than I am. So, it's, I feel like I know myself better. But the training is similar and especially, you know, leading into Paris. We have, I compete on September 1st, so I actually have a countdown right next to me. I have 72 days until I complete. So, so it's still like a, it's still a long time, but it's going to go fast. So, my days revolve around training. I mean, this morning I was in the pool and the strength gym, I ran. So, my days very much revolve around training. And then, halfway through the day, I put the mom hat on and go about my mom life. So, I enjoy it, though I enjoy it. I feel like you can't, I do it, if I didn't enjoy it, it wouldn't be worth it, because it's so time consuming.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then you're able to switch gears and be a mom, although you probably, most days think being a mom is harder than being a Paralympian. Are your children pretty young?

**Melissa Stockwell:** They're six and nine. Yeah. I know I need all the advice I can get with my kids. Yeah. It's hard. It's a hard job. It's the best job. It's a hard job.

**Whitney Johnson:** Absolutely, absolutely. All right, so let's go back to April 13th, 2004. You are a first lieutenant with the Army's Transportation Corps. You're at the head of a routine convoy through central Baghdad. Then your Humvee shreds the truck, slams through a guardrail into a house. How do you approach that day to day? And I guess. What does that mean in the narrative of your life?

**Melissa Stockwell:** So, that day is a day that changed my life forever. I mean, it was obviously some I mean, I joined the Army, I chose to join. I knew that was going to have to go over to the Middle East, over to Iraq, to a war. But you never think that something like losing a leg is going to happen to you, like, until it does. Like you think I didn't go over there thinking, huh, I'm going to go over there and I'm going to come back without my leg. Like you just never think like you think. Those things only happen to somebody else, right? You never think it's going to be you. But that day, I mean, that was the last day I stood on my own two legs. It was, I mean, a traumatic experience, obviously. You know, I was 24 years old in a second. I mean, an entire leg is gone. But, like, I had an emergency surgery in the Baghdad emergency room, you know, it was a lifesaving surgery. I was losing a lot of blood. And I remember waking up and just having this preconceived notion of this is really hard and going to be really hard, but I know that I can get through this. I had immediate family members around me. I remember, you know, I was thankful it was me and not another one of my soldiers. It was this, you know, when I, So, every April 13th, every year that comes up, we actually celebrate it, and we celebrate it instead of mourning what we've lost. We, you know, celebrate what we still have. So, you know, it changed my life, but I've done some pretty incredible things in the last 20 years, and I'm really proud of them.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. It's interesting what you just said. You're like, I knew I could get through it. Where did that come from?

**Melissa Stockwell:** It's hard to know. I know, I feel like I get asked a decent amount, you know, where does the positivity or the optimism come from? And I've always been a pretty optimistic person. Probably annoyingly optimistic for a lot of people. But it's, I find that I can get inspired or motivated by the most random things. I mean, looking out the window and seeing a tree blowing in the wind. I'm like, oh wow, that's beautiful. Like it's just the things that I get really motivated by. So, I think I've always kind of been that way. But then after losing a leg, I mean, obviously something that you never expect, you have no idea if you're going to be able to get through it. And then you realize that not only can you get through it, but you can like, thrive and be better on the other side. So, it's, I don't know. It's like, why? Why not like, why choose to be negative and have that pessimistic attitude when you can choose to have, be the other way around, I guess.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, yeah. I love that. It just comes back to our agency. We choose. How are we going to view an experience? I'm curious, so your children are six and nine years old. How do you talk to them about having a prosthetic leg? What's that conversation look and sound like?

**Melissa Stockwell:** So, to them. So that's all they've known. So that to them I'm just mom. And I feel like they half the time they don't even see my prosthetic, which I would actually prefer. Yeah. And I used to joke that they would think that all moms had prosthetic legs until they, you know, they're in school age now, and they look around and they're like, huh? Like, oh, my mom is a little bit different. And it's not until their friends really noticed that they started to notice, which is just interesting. And they're like, oh, my mom is a little different. Like because that's again, that's all they know. So, because their friends have then asked questions and they start to ask questions, they know I lost it from a roadside bomb. They have seen pictures. You know, I speak at schools a lot and younger age kids. I never want to tell them because I don't like that it's I lost it to a bomb from a bad guy because I'd never want to scare these younger kids, But I thought it was important to me. My daughter, she's six. And for her to understand. And, so she does, I mean, now, but again, it's just mom, like, it's just like, you know, they're so used to carrying my running leg around, like, they know I have to wake up. It's just so normal to them that they don't even. I feel like they don't really have that many questions because it's just so normal. I don't know if that makes sense.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, it completely makes sense. Like we get up and we eat our breakfast, and this is what mom's body looks like, period. Right?

**Melissa Stockwell:** There's like, no difference again. Yeah. They've never known me otherwise.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Okay. So, I'm wondering, so this explosion happened only three weeks after you had landed in Iraq. So, do you ever feel like your s curve or your journey as a soldier was unfinished? Like what? Any. Any thoughts, any reflections there?

**Melissa Stockwell:** It was a short time in the military, but I like to say it was short but eventful. So. No, you know, I mean, I had I had a yearlong in my mind, I, we were supposed to be in Iraq for a year. So, in my mind, I had this year, this chunk of my life that was planned out. And it just so happened that I spent the majority of it in the hospital instead so, no, no, I mean, it's I don't I don't know if I agree with like things happen for a reason, but like they kind of do or they things, just when you look back, they just kind of seem to work out how they should. And I, so, I don't know, no, I don't think there's any unfinished business there. Like finish time. I feel like I've. Again, it was short but yeah, eventful.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's interesting listening to you talk Melissa. I mean I know you know this but I'm going to point it out anyway listening to you talk because I do a lot of coaching, leadership, coaching, your resilience and emotional regulation. My guess is if people kind of tested you for it, it would be off the charts. It's really, it's awesome. So, I just want to call that out.

**Melissa Stockwell:** That's fine. Thank you.

**Whitney Johnson:** I would love to hear about a moment you started to touch on this earlier when you're swimming, but I would love to hear about a moment. And it might be when you were at the Olympics, but it might be another time where as an athlete, you just felt completely in flow, like there was just this. This feels so good. Where were you? What were you doing? What did it feel like? What did it smell like? Can you think of 1 or 2 of those moments for yourself?

**Melissa Stockwell:** So, obviously there's moments in competition and there's, you know, kind of obvious ones of like being on a podium. I mean, that's like one of the highlights of my life and the Paralympic Games. But I think aside from that, there's...so I love running and running is, so I love swimming. It makes me feel this whole. But running is something that I didn't know if I'd be able to do again. And now that I do it and I just have this, I love the feeling of it. I love the sound of my prosthetic blade on the track or on the road. And I mean, I'll get, like, even just this week, there was a Tuesday morning. I was out of the track at 6:30 a.m. it was like the perfect temperature. I started to run. I'm like, this is going to be a good run. I had some hard efforts and I just felt so in tune with myself. The sound of my foot on the track, the breathing that I was like myself, breathing like the sun is kind of up, but it's not quite up. And just those are the. And then you just see your times. You're like, wow. Like this is a really good workout. And it just kind of fills me up. You know, it kind of starts my day off and I think, okay, like I can do this. So, it's just like it's and they don't have those workouts don't happen all the time. So, when they do it kind of makes them extra special.

**Whitney Johnson:** Mhm. Mhm. Talk to me about the community of athletes that you compete with and what that looks like.

**Melissa Stockwell:** So, I live in Colorado Springs, so I train at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, and we have a resident team, which basically means that there are seven of us that train together pretty much every day. Some live on campus, like on the actual Olympic Training Center campus, and some live off complex like I do, like in a house. And then we just go to the training center to train. So, and these are athletes that, there's another girl, one of my best friends that's in my classification. So, we're direct competitors, but the other ones have visual impairments, have spinal cord injuries. So, are in wheelchairs. So, kind of different, different disability types. But we're all coming together for the same goal, and they are just incredible. I mean, they're some of my best friends. There are my second family. We spend so much time together. And then when we go to these competitions, like to Paris, for example, there's other athletes that don't live at the training center but live and train on their own from kind of all over the nation. And we come together for these big competitions. And there are, you know, we have this special bond, triathlon as such where, I don't know, it just tends to, I feel like it tends to attract the good, good people. Like they're all just great people. And my, my teammates, I mean that they really are what kind of keep me going year after year as my teammates.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay. So, tell me about Dare2tri and what's its impact?

**Melissa Stockwell:** Yeah. So, Dare2tri. So, it's Dare2tri para triathlon club and dare, the number two, and then tri. So, in 2010. So gosh, 14 years ago now two friends and I co-founded it, back in Chicago. And the idea was to get athletes with physical disabilities into the sport of triathlon. So, a lot of times you take somebody, you know, like anyone off the street, you're like, hey, do a triathlon. They're like, oh, I can never do that. I'm never going to swim, bike or like, no way, I can't do that. Which I will tell them that yes, you can, but you take somebody with a physical disability, maybe they're blind, maybe they're in a wheelchair and you're like, hey, do you want to do a triathlon? And they're like, I could never do that. It's like, how would I do that? Like, I'm in a wheelchair, but I dare to try. You prove to them that they can. And we, adaptive equipment can be expensive. You don't just walk into a store and get a bike that you power with your arms like so that's a barrier. A lot of times coaching, you know, getting to races, knowing the races, finding that community, there are all these barriers to get into the sport and Dare2tri kind of takes all these barriers away.

**Melissa Stockwell:** So, we have adaptive equipment that we can provide. We have year-round programming. We have different camps for youth, adults, injured service members and we get these athletes to the starting line, and they swim, they bike, and they run. And sometimes oftentimes they get to the finish line and they, just the self-confidence and self-worth is just like exuding in them, like what they can do, and they see how much ability is in their disability. We like to say that the finish line is just the beginning for a lot of our athletes. So, it's, you know, in the past, I mean, we have served five, six, seven, 800 different athletes and made a positive impact on their lives. And some of them have gone on to be Paralympians. Some of them have gone on to be able just to ride a bike around the neighborhood with their kids when they didn't think they could do that before. So, it's kind of from that grassroots community level all the way up to the top, and we kind of do it all, and it's pretty incredible.

**Whitney Johnson:** Is this a nonprofit or a for profit company?

**Melissa Stockwell:** Yeah. Nonprofit.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay. And so, you raise money for it.

**Melissa Stockwell:** We do. Yep.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, if people wanted to, maybe we can put in the show notes if people want to donate to this, let's do that.

**Melissa Stockwell:** Yeah, the website is [dare2tri.org](http://dare2tri.org) And there's volunteer opportunities all over. We're based out of Chicago, so mainly in the Midwest. But yeah, I mean, any sort of I mean, the expensive equipment, I mean, the money goes a long way with us.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay. So, you're based out of Chicago. Great. Yeah. So, let's include that and we will make a small donation. So, thank you for sharing that.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right, so, Melissa, you're 44 years old. Your children are young. This is your fourth Olympics. What do you want to get done in the next 20 or 30 years? Like what, what big ambition do you have?

**Melissa Stockwell:** That's a tough one because I'm so, for the past so, I started the Paralympic Games in 2008. It's 2024. And like I'm still going right. So, this has been my life for a long time. Like I mean my life has revolved I mean, family is always first, but my life has kind of revolved around athletics for years and years and years. So, short term goals obviously Paris, but that's 72 days. So that's coming up. And there's no telling like what's going to happen after that. Like am I going to continue to LA. A lot has to happen for that. Like I need to still love the sport. My body has to hold up. I still need to be competitive. So, a lot of things have to happen for that. So, when I think about the next, you know, 15, 20 years, I mean obviously my family comes up first. I want to continue to be the best mom I can be to show my kids, to give them opportunities to be there for them and to, you know, believe, help them believe that they can do anything that they want to do.

**Melissa Stockwell:** I do a lot of motivational speaking, so I enjoy sharing my story. And I've, you know, kind of travel all around to various companies doing that. So, continuing to do that and inspiring others in hopes that, you know, they can see their own potential in their own life. But I don't know, like, I've always been very goal oriented. So, I don't know, I feel like something else is going to come up. I can't imagine athletics ever going away from my life, so they'll still be. Even if I'm not at the elite level, there will be some sort of other athletic endeavors. Maybe I'll do more coaching, you know, maybe I'll, I don't know, start a Dare2tri chapter out in Chicago and help other athletes. There's a lot of opportunities. I think after Paris, I'll kind of give myself some time to like, rest and reflect and then kind of probably I'll have to figure it out. But that's kind of the exciting part of it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay. Yeah. I just wondered if you had some, like, master plan and what you're saying. Yeah, my master plan is I'm going to keep on doing fantastic things. I'm putting words in your mouth, but, and it's going to have something to do with sports, and I'm going to be a great mom. And the opportunities and where you can serve will emerge. That's what I'm hearing.

**Melissa Stockwell:** Yes, I think that's accurate.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, a question that I tend to ask um, and you may not have anything, but we'll see. So, at the end of an interview is what was useful for you in this conversation. So, it might not be anything that you said, but it might be just like, oh, I had this idea. What came up for you in the conversation?

**Melissa Stockwell:** So, I like that you asked what, to describe a moment that, you know, you kind of feel and you smell these things because you don't often think about those, right? Like you don't think about those moments and they're really around us every day, but you kind of live them and then you kind of forget them where you don't think about them. And I think it's even just like, I, I mean, like this track workout on Tuesday, like I knew it was a good one, but I didn't really think about how great it was. So, I think kind of focusing sometimes on those small things are, can be so and so, like moving or beneficial or just like important to recognize that we live in this massive world. But it's the little things that can make like these big moments, you know. So, I appreciate that. Just kind of the reflection on, you know, something that I wouldn't normally focus on.

**Whitney Johnson:** So good. All right. Any final closing thoughts that you'd like to share with our listeners.

**Melissa Stockwell:** I don't think so. Hopefully everyone will tune in. September 1st is when I'll be racing over in Paris, and, you know, it'll be live on I think on somewhere on the internet. There'll be highlights on NBC and hopefully I'll be on that podium, but just appreciate the USA cheers and can't wait to be out there with my teammates.

**Whitney Johnson:** Thank you, Melissa. It's been an absolute delight.

**Melissa Stockwell:** Thank you I appreciate you having me on.

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What isn't in our control has a way of reminding us just what IS in our control. The world can take a lot from us, but our perspective – how we choose to internalize events – derives from our personal agency. This can't be touched. It's our choice, and Melissa's spirit embodies that.

When adversity comes knocking, it's easy to surrender. To let the current wash, you away. And who could blame you, when your chest tightens, and your hands shake, and your thoughts turn to despair? But when we do that, we're only betraying ourselves. It's an everyday struggle to maintain our sense of agency, but Melissa's emotional

regulation and sheer optimism are reminders that we have a lot more control than we realize. Honor your pain, Melissa reminds us, but don't let it get in the way of dreaming. Hold on to your agency, hold on to what makes you, you.

For another inspiring story of pushing past physical disabilities and daring to dream bigger, there's my talk with James E. Dixon, [episode 343](#). On maintaining that agency over our future when life changes on a dime, there's my recently [re-aired conversation](#) with Olympic speed skater Apolo Ohno. And on the power of harnessing your trauma to build something new and beautiful, I'd point you to [episode 118](#) with Carol Kauffman.

Thank you again to Melissa Stockwell and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. If you want to know more about how DA can support you and your organization, you can reach us at [workwithus@thedisruptionadvisors.com](mailto:workwithus@thedisruptionadvisors.com).

Thank you to our producer, Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Etta King and production coordinator, Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson, and this has been Disrupt Yourself.