S3, E16 — Paralympian Jeff Butler Shares Innovations in Accessibility Solutions From the 2024 Games

**Molly Lazarus** 00:00

Welcome to Changing What's Possible: The Disability Innovation Podcast brought to you by Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation. My name is Molly Lazarus. Today on Innovation in Five, we are so thrilled to have Paralympian Jeff Butler — who just returned from his time in Paris — with us today. Welcome, Jeff.

**Jeff Butler** 00:22

Thanks, Molly. Appreciate it

**Molly Lazarus** 00:23

Before we hop in, Jeff, can you tell me a little bit about you and your background?

**Jeff Butler** 00:27

Certainly. So I was born and raised in Indiana, highly relevant to the story of me and how I got here is when I was 13, I broke my neck in a car accident, and have been a wheelchair user ever since, pretty quickly after I broke my neck, I found a sport called wheelchair rugby, which ticked all of the important boxes for me. It was intellectually stimulating. It was physically aggressive. If you've never seen it, it's like bumper cars meets chess.

**Molly Lazarus** 0:53

Yeah.

**Jeff Butler** 00:54

From there, decided I wanted to get to the highest level — set a goal to be on the Paralympic team. Fast forward about 12 years. I made my first team in 2015 my first Paralympics was 2016 in Rio, and then again in Tokyo, and then just again in Paris, coming back surprisingly, getting a silver medal in each one of those. But I've really enjoyed that. And in parallel to my athletic career, I've been in and around startups, founding a company back in 2016 and working for a handful in the accessibility/ assistive tech space. And now that I'm back from Paris looking for my next adventure,

**Molly Lazarus** 01:28

Amazing. So I have to ask, how was your time at Paris 2024 games.

**Jeff Butler** 01:34

It was incredible, and it was such a contrast to the other two games I've been to. So as I mentioned, my first games was Rio 2016. The fans were incredible. The games, for a variety of reasons, were slightly mismanaged. Tokyo 2020 incredibly well managed, right? It's Japan. The busses ran on like exactly the 32nd intervals that they needed to everything was incredible. And it was the covid games. And so there were no fans. I couldn't have any family or friends. And so Paris was, you know, a double win. We got both. It was immaculately managed. The food was good, the housing was incredible. And at the same time, we were playing in an arena that I think holds 7,500 people — spectators. And for almost all of our games, it was full.

**Molly Lazarus** 02:20

Incredible.

**Jeff Butler** 02:21

Right. I had 25 or 30 people, friends and family, watching me in the stands, which was an incredible experience. And the outcome was great. We took medal home, which is what you always want to do. It was as incredible of experience as I could have hoped for.

**Molly Lazarus** 02:33

We watched you on TV, and we saw those stands were packed. I was really excited for that. So kind of shifting to the accessibility of the games, and just curious, maybe a high and a low. What was your high around the accessibility of the games, and what was your low?

And I mean, put this in the context of — you know that Paris is probably not the most accessible city on the planet, given its history and cobblestones and all of that.

**Jeff Butler** 02:58

Yeah, so the high is actually a couple so as part of being on the team USA delegation, Nike, Polo Ralph Lauren and a whole slew of other sponsors equip us with a whole bunch of clothing/gear to wear while we're in the village and while we're competing.

This year, Nike went overboard in an incredible way on the accessibility and assistive tech built into their garments.

**Molly Lazarus** 03:25

Ah.

**Jeff Butler** 03:26

The best example I have — so I'm a quadriplegic. I can't move my fingers very well, and for the first time ever, I was able to put on a jacket with a zipper on it — all by myself. And it's because Nike built into their zippers, or are using some kind of magic zipper that has a magnet at the bottom, so all you have to do is get the two pieces of the jacket close to each other. The magnet magnetizes onto itself, brings the two together, and it's really easy to zip up. And it blew my mind.

I was like, “Oh my gosh, it's been 20 years since I could easily put a jacket on myself.”

**Molly Lazarus** 03:58

Game changer.

**Jeff Butler** 03:59

And Nike did it everywhere. There's a backpack that we got that was really built with people with disabilities in mind and kind of big universal design practices. I was talking with a couple of the people who were at Nike and giving us the gear, and they said, “we're really excited to build for people with disabilities, knowing that if it works for them, it's going to work for everyone.”

And I was like, “what?!” Nike, you know, one of the biggest companies on the planet, is focusing on people with disabilities first. So that was absolutely the high.

**Molly Lazarus** 04:29

That's really, really cool. I'm really excited to hear that. And are those zippers? Are they making those available other places?

**Jeff Butler** 04:35

Unclear. I sure hope so.

**Molly Lazarus** 04:37

Okay.

**Jeff Butler** 04:38

I'm sure there's additional cost involved, but every single piece, from the podium gear to the jackets that they were giving us. They gave us a pair of shoes that were similarly built for people with limited dexterity first. So I hope that this is a first step that snowballs into a lot more, but really, really encouraging to see a massive company like that putting people with disabilities first.

**Molly Lazarus** 04:59

Amazing. And what was your accessibility low?

**Jeff Butler** 05:03

The accessibility low — and I think if you asked anyone on my team, it would be exactly the same. We had our first game against Canada, and we were all on the second and third floor of our building in the village, and both elevators simultaneously were down.

**Molly Lazarus** 05:20

Oh, no (commiserating chuckle)

**Jeff Butler** 05:21

So you can imagine we had quite the exciting morning. We called everyone on, you know, USA staff on the ground to help us out. We had our equipment manager, we had our athletic trainer giving people piggyback rides. You know, one person would grab our wheelchair and the other person would grab us and carry us down.

So that added a little extra excitement, you know, for our first game, but all's well, that ends well, but easily an accessibility low given, you know, the amount of extra stress we had that morning.

Thankfully, they got the elevators fixed, but they were a little spotty from then on.

**Molly Lazarus** 05:53

Yikes. And this was a village they constructed specifically for the Paralympics. Is that correct?

**Jeff Butler** 05:59

Yeah. So the Olympics and the Paralympics share an athlete's village, so the Olympians get it first. When they are done, two weeks later, all the Paralympians move in. And oftentimes, I don't know exactly how Paris is planning on using the village after the games now that the games have ended, but oftentimes they turn them into affordable housing units.

**Molly Lazarus** 06:17

I've heard that that's the plan for this year, too.

**Jeff Butler** 06:21

Yeah, and so I hope that they're able to get those elevators sorted for the long term.

**Molly Lazarus** 06:25

Yes. And were the rooms designed accessibly, knowing that it would be Olympics and Paralympics? Did they feel like they were?

**Jeff Butler** 06:34

Thankfully they were, and I really applaud the organizing committee also, because they had little accessibility, like, Easter eggs that I wouldn't have expected in, you know, kind of something that's built for mass consumption like this.

But the one that I remember really well is in the showers, which were accessible, there were zero-entry showers. And then every single room there were these 3D printed caps that went on the end of the showers to take what was like, kind of a small and hard-to-move lever, and made it into a very large, very easy to use system for people with disabilities.

And I grabbed it, and I was looking, I was like, you know, it's 3D printed, and they must have 3D printed, 1000s of these, right? In every single room the village times two showers, right? So tons of these things. And just the thought that went into that was really surprising, and a very cool feeling, right? You know that —

**Molly Lazarus** 07:29

Yeah —

**Jeff Butler** 07:30

They're going above and beyond.

**Molly Lazarus** 07:31

That's really cool. So along those lines, you must have seen a lot of assistive tech, whether it was people who brought their own or that was built in there. What did you see? What was exciting to you? You know this space pretty well. What was like, “Whoa, this is really neat.”?

**Jeff Butler** 07:46

Yeah, I think the biggest kind of trend that I saw at the games just looking at the athletes and what people were using, specifically in the assistive tech side, the fifth wheels that are like a powered wheel that you hook onto the front of your wheelchair, brings your front wheels up, and you become kind of a scooter — a quarter of all athletes had them, which was a little bit of a hazard at times, because they're a lot faster than, you know, the unpowered version of the chairs.

But literally, it seemed like overnight, there's been an explosion of these things, which I think is great. I use a smart drive, which is kind of the opposite, right? It's one powered wheel in the back of my chair that helps me get around a lot easier.

But just the amount of people using these fifth wheels, to the extent that they had to ban them from the cafeteria, there became like fifth-wheel parking out front of the dining hall. That was one.

And then another interesting trend that I saw, kind of in a similar vein, is a ton of Chinese athletes were on these — they looked like carry-on suitcases — that were powered and it was just the Chinese delegation. I don't think any of them are wheelchair users, but they had some kind of limited mobility. And every single one of them was riding a suitcase around. And it was just blowing my mind. But it was so neat, and it was so ubiquitous that just in the Chinese delegation, you could tell that they had been given these, which was just fascinating.

**Molly Lazarus** 09:06

So you like, sit on the suitcase? How does that work?

**Jeff Butler** 09:10

They were sitting on the suitcase, and there was a little handlebar that almost looked like a scooter, and they were just zooming around. It was so neat, and it was clearly useful to their mobility, and something that I wouldn't be surprised if we see, but literally, it looked like they were riding on a carry-on suitcase. It was so strange.

**Molly Lazarus** 09:26

I mean do you bring your backpack? Do you bring your mobility aid? This is great.

**Jeff Butler** 09:31

Why not both? Yeah, exactly, exactly. But to kind of put a bow on it, tons of additional kinds of mobility modalities I saw, which was cool, and my Smart Drive has unlocked a ton of you know, I can go on three, four-mile walks with my fiancee easily. Similarly, I use a free wheel, which hooks onto the front of my chair and makes it easier for me to go kind of off road or on a hike. And it's exciting to see more and more of these nonstandard, nontraditional mobility aids coming up. And that's exciting.

**Molly Lazarus** 10:02

Yeah, we see them often when we go to the Abilities Expo, these different add-ons to your chair that allow folks to kind of adventure in different ways, hoping insurance catches up to that soon.

**Jeff Butler** 10:14

Yeah, well, and that's another thing that I think is so exciting, too, on that note — is that a lot of these fifth wheels, they're around $1,000 which, you know, that's a lot of money, but people who are used to paying mobility-aid prices, you know, $1,000 is a drop in the bucket compared to your 20,000, 30- $40,000 power chair. And so I think there might even be a world where you can kind of go around insurance with price of these things keeps going down, which is, I think, a trend that we've seen a lot.

**Molly Lazarus** 10:42

It's definitely with all the work that we do as well. So any other global takeaways from accessibility, or kind of the way people are thinking about disability that you learn by being at the Games?

**Jeff Butler** 10:53

Last week, I was at Austin, and I was at my bachelor party with a couple of my teammates, and it was a piano bar, and we were having a good time, and all of a sudden this woman from across the bar runs over and goes, “oh my gosh, are you guys USA wheelchair rugby?” And we couldn't believe it, right? We're there. We're just hanging out. We're like, “Yeah, it's my bachelor party. We're hanging out. We just got back from Paris,” and this woman had watched every one of our games, knew how we did, knew our names, right?

And for the first time, that was like a big aha moment to me, that parasport people with disabilities are being recognized at I think, a higher level than we have in the past. The stat from NBC is that 15 million people tuned in to watch the Paralympics, which is wildly more successful than any prior Paralympic viewership. And I have really been feeling that surge. I've had cousins, friends, coworkers, wedding photographers, come up to us and say, “we watched every single game. It was incredible. How do you do X, Y or Z, or what comes next?”

And just this massive following in viewership is unheard of. Definitely did not feel this after Tokyo. Certainly did not feel it after Rio and going into our home games in LA. I think that having a robust parasport movement does a lot for people with disabilities, from top to bottom.

**Molly Lazarus** 12:14

That's so exciting. And as a really be about LA along the same lines, what should we be doing in these four years to make it so it's not just a surprise, but an inevitability that these are the most popular games for the Paralympics that we've seen so far?

**Jeff Butler** 12:32

It starts, I think, with understanding that the Paralympics are a high performing, competitive, elite sporting event.

**Molly Lazarus** 12:45
Yeah.

**Jeff Butler** 12:46

That's the most important I think. I think we're over the hump now. But for a long time, the stories about Paralympians would end up in the lifestyle section of the newspaper, not the sports section. For a long time, people would say, “Oh, are you participating in the Paralympics?”

No, I'm competing in the Paralympics, and I think we're feeling that shift away. But one of the first thing this has to happen to your question is we have to be respected as elite athletes first, and I think that we're starting to feel that shift.

The other thing that needs to happen, and the way people can really support is by assuming that they already tuned in to NBC, which a lot of people already did tell your friends and family about how cool it was to watch rugby or basketball or wheelchair tennis. It's not a sure thing that LA is going to be more successful than Paris when it comes to the Paralympics, but you know, sharing your stories, whether it's on social media or in person, and really helping this grassroots movement continue to elevate, I think, is the best thing that we can do. And then, of course, when LA comes around, tune in. Cheer loud. Come to LA. Weather's not bad. Get in a stadium and support Team USA,

**Molly Lazarus** 13:48

I am crossing my fingers to be in LA to see the games Jack. Thank you so much for joining us. Super interesting to hear the behind the scenes of what we all watched our TVs in Paris and wishing you the best at your upcoming wedding.

**Jeff Butler** 14:03

Yes, thank you so much. Molly. Just around the corner, it's creeping up.

**Molly Lazarus** 14:06

These things dear, don't they? Thanks for being here.

**Jeff Butler** 14:10

Thanks for having me.

**Molly Lazarus** 14:11

Before you go, listeners, we're excited to let you know about 3forCP, CPARF’s grassroot fundraising initiative for cerebral palsy research and disability innovation. Whether you level up a read-a-thon, a sip and paint event, a comedy show, or something else that you love, 3forCP gives you the chance to make a difference in your own signature way. Head to three for CP to get started. That's the number 3, F, O, R, C, P, dot, O, R, G, and thank you for joining us for Innovation in Five.