

Changing What's Possible - S. 1 Ep. 4 Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Marie McNeely, Ali Jawad, Becky Porte

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:01

Hello and welcome to Changing What's Possible: The Disability Innovation Podcast brought to you by the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation. I'm your host, Dr. Marie McNeely. And this season we are excited to bring you remarkable stories of life-changing technology. Today we have with us Ali Jawad. And Ali is co-founder of the company Accessercise as well as a four-time Paralympian power lifter. And today, he is going to talk about their first-ever complete fitness app created specifically for people with disabilities. And in the second half of our episode, today, we are going to hear from Becky Porte who uses Accessercise for her own training.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:40

So listeners, let's get started. Ali, thank you so much for joining us today.

A Ali Jawad 00:46

Thanks for having me on.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 00:47

Well, Ali, we're excited to learn more from you and to hear more about Accessercise. So, can you start by telling us more about the company and your role there?

A Ali Jawad 00:55

So I'll give you some context behind it. So people understand the story, because I think that's really important and how it got created. So I was born as a double-leg amputee in the UK. And I had dreams of being a Paralympian. And when I started going to gyms when I was younger, I

kind of questioned why I was the only disabled person in the gym. There was nobody else like me; had to rely on able-bodied people to kind of guide my training, I didn't really feel independent enough. And there was no fitness tools out there for me. So in 2020, when I was kind of reflecting on my career, I asked myself whether or not that's changed. So there's some research and I found that there are over 70,000, health and fitness apps available and none fully catered for people with impairments and disabilities. So I knew that actually, my experiences were valid, but also they've not changed for the wider disability community in the 18 years that I started elite sport. So I thought that had to change. And that's how we created Accessercise!

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Dr. Marie McNeely 01:51

That's phenomenal. And I know, identifying the problem is a huge part of launching a start-up company. But was it difficult kind of diving into the business side of things?

A

Ali Jawad 01:59

Oh, absolutely. Because I'm not an entrepreneur, my background is just in elite sport. And obviously, I'm not a tech person. So I did lack the business skills. But my co-founder, he's more kind of business-minded, which definitely helped me. But I guess, as an elite athlete, you kind of adapt to new challenges in your career. And you always have the adaptation and the flexibility to pull off some really big ambitions. So I guess I had to use that to kind of my advantage to learn and yeah, we're still learning. We're kind of really proud that we managed to launch ship from initial idea to a fully functional app in the UK within one year of the idea.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 02:35

That is amazing. So can you walk us through in a little bit more detail how you got to that point from initial idea to within a year (which was an amazing timeline) having this company?

A

Ali Jawad 02:45

Yeah, we also had COVID, as well. So in full lockdown, so everything was virtual as well. So that was a big caveat. But so basically, I started thinking about if there was a fitness app out there for the disabled community, what would it look like? What features would I want it to have to achieve the goal of making Accessercise accessible, but also gives it independence for disabled people to keep fit and healthy on their terms. So started kind of drafting the features. Realizing that with an app, it's not just about the features, it's all about the flow, the usability, the functions. It got quite complicated when we actually started delving deeper and deeper. So we outsourced the app development to an app development company that kind of aligned to our goals. And they were very good in terms of communicating with us and actually getting things done with the deadlines that we set for them. And we're having literally six hour meetings every single day to go through all the details of how the app is going to run. So having just the features was never enough. So it took its toll in that year because it made me realize that building an app was going to be very, very tough.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 03:48

And it sounds like you've put a lot of thought and energy into developing this application. So Ali, how does Accessercise work?

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Ali Jawad 03:55

So basically, there are three key features in the app, which allows us to hopefully achieve our reign of exercise independence. One feature is a unique video exercise library, which is tailor-made to the user's impairment. So for example, all the video demonstrations are performed by somebody of the same impairment as the user. So the user then gets to create their own training program themselves at their own pace. We don't give out training programs. And that means they are fully independent. Two, we've got a social hub. We know that in the disability community confidence is a really big issue in terms of actually using gym facilities. So with a social hub, users get to like and share and comment on basically other people's journeys to hopefully encourage them to keep going and I thought the sense of community was really important. And the last one, which I thought would be the most impactful was an explore section that allowed users to rate the accessibility of gyms and sporting facilities in the local area. Now, the big advantage to that is, we'll have real-life data to suggest whether or not the fitness industry is actually accessible, but it also will inform the fitness industry of what it can do better in the future to attract to sell people into their gyms.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 05:09

Definitely. And I think this transparency, going both ways is really important. Helping people find places that will be a good fit for their needs, and also helping those places become better fits for everybody's needs. So can you talk a little bit more about who you envision Accessercise might be a good fit for? You mentioned, some specific video content tailored to people with different needs or disabilities. So what kinds of videos do you have?

A

Ali Jawad 05:32

So thinking about the idea initially, I thought, well, there are so many disabilities and impairments out there. What do you want to achieve with this? Do you kind of stick to physical impairments? Do you go, "No, we want to make it bigger and better" or... we kind of deliberated quite a lot of what we wanted Accessercise to be. And I thought to myself, well, fundamentally, we want the disability community to be able to exercise independently without relying on other people. So we made kind of a promise, it's a big promise, we've still got a long way to achieve it. So please be patient with us. But we want it to be the most accessible fitness app there's ever been for every single impairment out there. And I know that's going to take a very long time. But that has to be the aim. As an elite athlete, you aim for being a Paralympian or meddler at the Paralympics, I was lucky to achieve that. So why not have that same dream when it comes to Accessercise? And I guess, I just want every single disabled person out there to know that we are thinking of them, and it is for them. So we're hoping that the exercise content, which varies from novice all the way to advanced and they can go at their own pace. I just hope that they come on the journey with us and give us as much feedback as possible.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 06:39

Absolutely. And I'm glad you mentioned this point about starting from novice all the way to advanced because I think starting an exercise plan or program can be really intimidating. So how do you envision people are going to be able to, I guess, decide where they fit on that continuum? And do you really feel like this novice like is it really novice where people would feel comfortable kind of jumping right in?

A

Ali Jawad 06:57

In the exercise section, there's a filter where we kind of ask you your level, or what you think your perception of your level is. And then basically, you go through the subcategories of your level, your exercise frequency a week, what equipment you have, what impairment you are, and basically, it filters everything that you've told us into the video exercises in the library. And then you get to pick your favorite - any exercises that you like. And that's how you create your own training program without actually realizing.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 07:25

Oh, that's cool. And you've hinted at this throughout our conversation, Ali. But if you had to really pin it down and summarize what really makes Accessercise different from some of the other solutions that may be available for people with disabilities?

A

Ali Jawad 07:38

When I did some research, the one thing that really bothered me was the lack of quality out there with other disability-focused apps in terms of how in-depth they were. I felt that the content was too generic, too general - lacked any evidence in terms of scientific. I come from a scientific evidence-based background, because I'm also doing a PhD. So, it bothered me that because it lacked any science it will be quite dangerous. Potentially, it could hurt a lot of disabled people with the complexities of their impairments, you have to be very scientifically based. And at the moment, there is no extensive science out there to support exercise for different impairments and what's safe or not. So we have partnered with a university to make sure the research is done for us in conjunction for them to make sure that science is informing us every step of the way to make sure that it can be the most integrated complete fitness app, there's ever been on the market.

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Dr. Marie McNeely 08:31

That's fantastic. And I think that's a difficult balance to achieve having an app that is showing people exercises that are a good fit, that are safe, that are appropriate for their disability. It's a difficult balance to obtain. So how do you I guess, navigate that challenge?

A

Ali Jawad 08:47

Because of my evidence-based background, we looked at the UK, it's only available in the UK at the moment. I realized that personal trainers cannot be the people that guide us because in the UK, you can get a personal training qualification in six weeks, it doesn't mean they're specialists in disabilities, so I thought, who can we think about, write the content for us, and create the content for us? So in the UK, we have an organization called the UK Strength and Conditioning Association, which is considered the gold standard of strength conditioning in the country. Now a lot of these practitioners work with the national teams, the Paralympics sports. So these practitioners are very high-level that work in disability sport at the highest level. So I decided to use their accredited practitioners to make sure that the content was right and evidence-based as much as possible.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 09:34

That's awesome! So Ali, if you had to think broadly, what are some of the impacts that you envision that Accessercise is either having right now, or has the potential to provide for its users?

A Ali Jawad 09:44

I think the potential is limitless in terms of what it could do for the industry in terms of one, opening the accessibility of the industry, but two, the number one dream for me was to make sure that disabled people could exercise independently on their terms without relying on anybody else, because we want to be as fit and active as everybody else, we just want the tools to do that. And Accessercise could be the tool that allows them to do that. That's the big dream for me, to make sure that every single disabled person has the tool to be in charge of their own exercise and fitness journeys. And that was kind of the foundation of what the app is built on.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 10:18

Absolutely. I think that autonomy, that sense of control is so important when you're managing your health and you're managing your fitness. So where can our listeners go, Ali, if they want to learn more about you or more about Accessercise?

A Ali Jawad 10:30

The social media channels, we've got LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram, and Facebook so go check us out there. We're obviously not live in the US yet - that's on our list. So only available in the UK at the moment, but we're hoping to go global pretty soon. So hopefully, you know, just watch this space.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 10:46

Fantastic. Well, listeners, definitely check out Accessercise. Get connected on social media. And Ali, thank you so much for joining us on the show today and telling us more about yourself and

the company.

A Ali Jawad 10:57

No, thank you!

D Dr. Marie McNeely 10:58

It's been a pleasure and listeners stay with us. We will be right back after this short break. To hear more about Accessercise from our next guest.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 11:06

So listeners we're excited to let you know about the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation's STEPtember campaign during the month of September. Each year, amazing people like you from around the world participate in this virtual health and wellness challenge to help us raise funds to support a life-changing research and innovation for cerebral palsy. In 2021, we raised \$1.86 million. And this year, we're hoping to reach even more people to further advance critical life-changing science for people with cerebral palsy. Registration is now open and it is free to sign up. Visit www.steptember.us to sign up and learn more about how our STEPtember trainers can help you support a great cause and reach your fitness goals.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 11:55

Now listeners, I am excited to introduce you all to our second guest, Becky Porte, someone who has been using the Accessercise app, and she is going to share her experience with all of us today. So Becky, we're excited to welcome you. Thank you so much for joining us.

B Becky Porte 12:09

Thanks for having me.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 12:10

Well, I'm excited to learn more about both you and your Accessercise experience. So can you start by telling our listeners a little bit more about yourself?

B Becky Porte 12:17

Sure! So I'm 28 years old, I was born with a congenital limb disorder, meaning that my left arm is shorter than my right. And I was also born with no fingers on that left hand and all my life I have been involved in sport and exercise, whether it's sports clubs at schools, outside of

school, I was involved in everything. Never let my impairment get in my way at all. I suppose that sparked my love for exercise and sports teams, individual and team sports. At the age of 19, I became a qualified personal trainer and fitness instructor. My main passion was to try and get disabled people involved in sport, help those out who probably well, are slightly less confident than I was. Very lucky that I was confident in the gym or around other people. So yeah, I got qualified as a personal trainer. And around a similar time I also started training as an athlete on two sports actually, the talent pathway program for target shooting and rowing for Great Britain. So I was classed as an upcoming athlete that had potential to make the official team but unfortunately didn't get anywhere internationally. But I had a great experience on both sports as an athlete learning skills and that's how my first interaction with disabled sport and other disabled athletes kind of started, really.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 13:43

Oh, very cool. So were in this journey did you first hear about Accessercise?

B

Becky Porte 13:47

So Accessercise is a relatively new thing for me probably the last year. I know one of the founders, Ali through disabled sport. And when he was an athlete himself, we met at various events and competitions and things. And he reached out to me probably just over a year ago and said, I've got this app that I think you would enjoy. It's got lots of great features on it. Did I want to be involved in the code testing experience of it? So I looked through it before it was live to the nation. I gave my feedback and got to try it out myself. And yeah, it's kind of gone from there. And I'm still really enjoying using it.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 14:23

That's cool! Now, had you used any, I guess specific tools or apps prior to starting to use Accessercise?

B

Becky Porte 14:29

Not specifically, no, I suppose I would use social media and Instagram and YouTube are great tools for finding workouts and things. But in my experience, well there wasn't many disabled people using or sharing on those platforms. So I'd take a workout that I wanted to use myself or one for one of our clients who had certain impairment and I had to sit and think about how I could adapt that for them or me. And that's where I think the challenge comes for a lot of users these days is that there's a lot of exercise content out there. But not a lot of it is designed or can be adapted for people with impairments. And I think that's where Accessercise has enabled that to change. And that's what I really love about it for myself. And for some of my clients that I still train that you can go on the app and pick a workout and see how it could be done in different ways.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 15:20

Definitely, I think it's so cool that you were able to kind of get this first look at Accessercise and provide feedback before it was even public. So I guess the first time you use the app, what was your initial impression, and that experience kind of opening it for the first time?

B Becky Porte 15:33

I just thought it was so cool. It really, really was, there's actually an app out there for disabled users in the world of fitness that has never been well, not that I know of - has ever been done before. It's so easy to use. And I just thought, wow, this is something that I needed 10-15 years ago, then if we had it, then how things would be different. But no, I think it's absolutely amazing and how it definitely opened up so many possibilities for users with impairments, and even personal trainers without that maybe want to start working with people with impairment, or just want to get more knowledge. Yeah, the app so easy to use. And it's got such a variety of content on there, which I think is just really, really easily accessible.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 16:14

Oh, very cool. So to give our listeners a sense of, I guess, what it's like using it, what is some of the content, what are some of the things that you really like about it?

B Becky Porte 16:21

For me, personally, I like that you can load your workouts on there that you've done, or create workouts on it. So if I'm having a bit of a mind block of what I want to do in the gym or at home, I can go on the app and filter what I want to work on that day. And it gives you a whole catalogue of exercises which are specific to my impairment. And when you sign up, you can select what your impairment is, and what your goals are. That way you can really easily filter out different exercises, then you get to build your workout. And then what is really cool is you can share it to the other users. So you can give it a title, give it a name, express how you felt during the workout, make little comments on it, and share it with other users of the app that you've connected with. So that's really nice. So I've actually made friends with a few people through the app that I don't know, in real life, I've never met before. But through the beta testing of the app, we've kind of got to know each other. And yeah, we kind of see what each other we're doing on there. And that's the great thing. I think when you have an impairment, for me, especially, I think you find a way of doing things yourself. But until you've actually seen it done maybe a slightly different way you wouldn't know to even try it. So the great thing about the app is seeing how other people train. And you might see an exercise on there that you've hadn't even thought of actually attempting yourself. But because there's a video dialogue of how to do it, and what attachments use, how this is good for your impairment, it gives you a lot more variety than maybe just the few exercises you feel comfortable with it. It does push you a little bit more.

D Dr. Marie McNeely 17:52

Definitely. And I love that it sounds like it combines these aspects of, you know, instructional videos and structured for your workout with this element of community because I think that

community can be a strong driver to get people engaged in exercise and keep them engaged as well.

B

Becky Porte 18:05

Oh, 100%. And there's a really lovely community section on it, where you can message each other, you can like each other's workouts, save each other's workouts, comment back and say, "Oh I did this today, it was really great. Thanks for sharing." And well within general gyms, if you haven't got many other people with impairments or disabilities there, you might be the only person involved in that gym that might have a disability. So you haven't got that I suppose peer group to bounce off of. Whereas this is the only app that I know of and only platform really that is able to do that, which I think is absolutely amazing.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 18:36

Definitely. Well, I appreciate you sharing some of these experiences of yours. And it sounds like this has had a pretty positive impact on your life and how you approach your workouts. So can you tell us a little bit more about some of the things that might have changed for you since you started using Accessercise?

B

Becky Porte 18:50

Definitely. So for a professional kind of point as a personal trainer, I've got other friends who are trainers as well. And they've previously would come to me and ask directly, "Oh, I've got a client who's got this condition or impairment, how would I work with them, and I have to reel off my experience and give them my ideas." Whereas now I've told them about the Accessercise app, and they can download that, go on it directly. And I think it's just allowing trainers to engage a bit more with disabled people knowing what could be good for them. And I think that's just absolutely amazing in a commercial environment, rather than directly go into maybe a group that specifically for people with impairments, and it allows them to create workouts on the app for their clients that they know is safe and designed for them. So I think it's allowing disabled people to feel more comfortable in gyms or training at home because it's got that element on there as well. And I just think that it's so positive whereas before maybe people with impairments wouldn't step foot in a commercial public gym because they wouldn't know what to do and the trainers there when you go through a physical exercise instructor's qualification, unless you go on an additional training course, you don't find out about how to adapt this for somebody with a disability or an impairment. So I think this is enabling instructors and trainers to be in gyms and work with clientele that have got disabilities, because they have the knowledge in front of them to be able to use it. Or vice versa. The client can say, look, I've got this app, it's created me a workout. Can you help me out with it? And I think it's just great for both sides. Yeah, I think it's just the main positive thing I've seen from it, that people do feel comfortable that to step into a gym following a program that's tailored safe for them to do, which I think is just great.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 20:37

Absolutely. I think this sort of personalized and safe feature is really important. And I liked the

idea that it sort of provides transparency into local gyms, gyms that are actually in people's neighborhoods. So do you find that this feature is particularly helpful maybe for people finding a gym, that's the best fit for them? Because there are quite a lot of them out there.

B

Becky Porte 20:55

Yeah, definitely. So that's another really cool feature on the app is that it has a interactive map of the whole of the UK, with all the gyms on there. And as a user, you can rate that gym based on its accessibility, the variety of equipment it's got and make comments about it. So if there is a gym local to you, that you've never set foot in before. And you might be a wheelchair user, for example, you don't know if it's wheelchair friendly, or wheelchair accessible. But users of the Accessercise app are trying to visit as many different gyms as possible, use the app, rate that gym on its accessibility, which I think just really helps create a safe environment for everybody and the like you say the transparency to be able to know what you're walking into. As somebody with a disability, walking into a public gym can be very daunting. So I think it's just great to really relax that user and hopefully get them into public gyms a lot more.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 21:51

Absolutely. And save time, I think so you don't personally have to visit every single gym to see which one might be the best fit for you. I think that's so cool. So I guess, Becky, thinking big-picture, who do you think might benefit from using Accessercise?

B

Becky Porte 22:04

The great thing about it is that I think it opens doors for a lot of different people. For the professionals in the gym, the trainers, the fitness instructors, who might have somebody with a disability in that gym setting or in their class, it educates them. For a disabled user themselves, you know, that wants to get into exercise, but doesn't really know where to start. Rather than going to the physiotherapist or paying a personal trainer, you've got this free app that is accessible on your phone, iPad, anything, to create workouts for you in the comfort of your own home or in a public space if you want to. And I think it's just opening up a whole lot of opportunities for people that might not know that it's there or might not ever have tried to look out there before. So I think the range of people it's benefitting is really, really wide. But also those who have been involved in exercise before like myself. Like I said earlier, you get a bit, I suppose tunnel vision with your own training programs, "I'll only stick to the exercises that I feel comfortable doing or the ones that I know I can do safely." Whereas actually, there's a lot of other exercises that I hadn't thought about that are on the app that I know I can do safely because it's been videoed by somebody with a similar disability to me. And I know that it's something I could now incorporate because I know how to do it.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 23:19

Absolutely. And I'm glad you brought this up just this wide range of people who might benefit I think people with a wide variety of disabilities might be interested in just increasing their physical activity and starting to do more exercises. So do you have some examples of the types

of disabilities that might be a good fit for this app that people may not think about?

B

Becky Porte 23:37

So the main disability is on the app that they have currently, I know they are trying to add some more categories, but you have upper limb impairments like myself whether you're born with a congenital disorder or an amputee. There's also lower limb amputees on their wheelchair users, people with spinal injuries, cerebral palsy, I think is coming on there soon. And also visually impaired users at the moment, that's a wide variety that there is. But within that you can mix and match, you don't have to just directly look at just your physical impairment, because obviously, you could do some of the other exercises that are from the other categories. And I think also just gives a great variety of exercises. If you're a wheelchair user, for example, you can go on to the other options, I think well actually from my chair, I could do that up in that category. And it just opens your mind a little bit more to options and trying to things which I think when you have a disability, you often just stick to the safe options that you know, personally. So I think the variety on there is really important.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 24:37

That is phenomenal. Well, Becky, you've shared a lot of great insights in terms of your experiences with Accessercise, but I guess do you have a message out there that you'd like to share with listeners who might be considering trying it?

B

Becky Porte 24:49

Just give it a go and it sounds so straightforward, but even if you're an avid regular gym user anyway, I know for me personally, there's been so much more on there that's opened my eyes. In the world of exercise and disabled exercise, just give it a go. If you're new to exercise, there's really great options on there, you know, you can start off with easy, moderate, and hard exercises, they're all categorized on there. So it doesn't need to be daunting for you. If you don't want the community side of it, you don't have to be involved, you can use it just for your own direct use. It's really your own app to navigate around and use to whatever benefit suits you. Or even if you don't have a disability, download it. And you'll be really inspired by some of the exercises you could use for your friends or clients, family members, even, if you've got a family member that could possibly need to get involved in a bit of exercise, there's some options and ideas on there to demonstrate to them. Just try it! Just download it and have a look through it. Because I think everyone will find something on there that will inspire them, motivate them and just enjoy it! It's really good fun as well.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 25:54

Fantastic. Well, I think that is a wonderful advice for our listeners. I'm glad you brought up this idea that it's kind of for all levels all the way beginner through advanced people who are trainers, fitness instructors, like you are can still find things of value there that they can benefit from in their own exercise.

B

Becky Porte 26:09

Definitely, yeah, it's an absolutely fantastic app. And I'm really pleased to have been involved with it from almost a start. I think it's great that people are still using it now. It just shows that it is a year of so on. It's absolutely needed and just really, really good, really helpful.

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 26:23

Fantastic. Well, Becky, we really appreciate you joining us to share your insights and experiences with everyone today.

B

Becky Porte 26:29

Thanks for having me. Thank you so much! And I hope that your listeners download Accessercise for whatever reason and enjoy it!

D

Dr. Marie McNeely 26:35

Fantastic. And for our US-based listeners, the Accessercise team, it plans on making the app available in the US soon. So stay tuned for the US-release. And it's been great to have you all with us today. And it would mean a lot for us if you could take a moment to subscribe to, rate, and review this podcast wherever you like to listen, and we look forward to connecting with you again in our next episode of Changing What's Possible.