

Episode Transcript

TAOLC EP: 025 -

The Healing Power of Sports: How to Thrive Through Fear with Claire Heafford.

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00:06 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Welcome to the Art of Living Consciously podcast, a show designed for out-of-the-box thinkers and mindset shifters who are looking for new ways to evolve. This is an intimate container designed to uplift, inspire and motivate you on your own growth journey. I'm your host, Dannie Reeve. As a certified BNE or Bio-Neuro-Emotion practitioner, I empower men and women to turn their conflicts into stepping stones for growth, because when you question your own beliefs and perceptions and take responsibility for your life, everything else follows. If you ask me, earth is a place where souls are sent to evolve, and in this podcast we will discuss the best tools for our evolution.

00:57

Today we have another very special guest on the show, my awesome gymnastics coach, Claire Heafford, who is also the head of Gymnasts for Change. In our chat today, she shares how a breakdown led her to want to follow her joy and put herself first. Little did she know that that decision would put her on the path to a soul-led mission and also to her own healing journey, and that both went hand in hand. Claire is great at teaching people how to step out of their comfort zone through the sports of gymnastics and wrestling. In this episode, she walks us through the process she uses to help people do that and you will also learn why feeling the fear and doing it anyway is not always the best option. We also talk about the tremendous impact of coaches, mentors and even peers we admire at a very young age, and why following your joy and doing what you do for a greater good is key to experiencing fulfilment and success. And there's so much more to this interview, so I'm very excited for you to listen and, without further ado, let's delve in.

02:10

Thank you so much for being on the show. I'm really excited. Thank you for your time. I'm sure we're going to have a very exciting, interesting conversation, so I'm really looking forward to it.

Claire Heafford (Guest)

Thank you for having me.

it's a real pleasure. I just think you are such a versatile, multi-talented, kind person with so much to teach everybody, so that's one of the motives I want to have you on here.

02:36

I have the pleasure to know you personally, as you are my awesome gymnastics coach, but you also wear many other hats. You are an ex-elite gymnast, but also a high level 400 metre hurdler. You did that from 16 to 26 and have been into communication, marketing, and worked in the arts. You refer to yourself as a serial entrepreneur. You're an NLP coach. So many, many, many hats.

03:00

I'm sure I probably haven't mentioned them all, but what I would like to focus on as well is you know, over the last five years, you've created some great projects. You started with Reset Lab Fitness. You co-founded with Tom, your partner, and you also co-founded Play Fight, which is for you to train wrestlers right, you train professional wrestlers. Reset Lab Fitness is more of a movement (focused project) . You do gymnastics for adults and body positivity, and you are also the co-founder and director of Gymnasts for Change, which is a grassroots organisation that is campaigning against abuse in gymnastics and also promoting a more positive environment when it comes to training young athletes and also giving a voice to people who have suffered from abuse, et cetera, in sports. So my question -I know this is a long-winded introduction and I hope I haven't forgotten anything -.

03:55 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

I think you've covered most of the bases there.

03:58 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Just for people to get an overview of. You. Know the kind of person you are and you know I'm really interested. As I said, in the last five years you went back into coaching and sports and I was wondering what motivated you to create Reset Lab Fitness and what is the why behind the way you have reconnected to your sports career over the last five years?

04:24 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

That is a good question. It all started with a breakdown. So in I don't know 2013, 14, I found myself in a place where I couldn't carry on doing what I was doing. I'd been running an art studio for eight years with a business partner who I love dearly and we kind of had a falling out and we closed the business and it left me totally devastated. She was my best friend and I loved the time that I had with her living in London, enjoying everything that the art scene has to offer, and a lot of my time at that point in my life was spent supporting the artistic endeavours of other people. And after eight, ten years of doing that, I just hit the wall and I felt like I'd been helping everybody else and not helping myself. So I went on a kind of journey. It got to new years and I was like, right, I'm not doing another year in the same way. So I set myself a project where I said, whatever you do this year, you have to do things that bring you joy. I started to do lots of banana things. I took up high diving, which I absolutely loved. I went on a circus audition to do a circus course and I found it wasn't quite what I wanted to do. But I met an amazing lady there who I told what I wanted to do. I said I'd seen some videos on YouTube of this lost art form called the apache and I wanted to be able to recreate these performances in cabaret settings. And she said, well, you need to look at the London School of Lucha Libre. So I looked it up and I saw they ran a show and I went to watch the show in a crazy railway arch at East London and I saw a wrestling match between my now partner and father of my child, and the other guy on the show in that match is now known as the world's top high-flying wrestler. And I saw them, like I was a meter away from them, doing these

high-flying moves and colliding into each other and performing these amazing fights with comedy value, and I just thought it was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen in my life. I couldn't believe I'd never seen this art form before and I just went. In that moment I went, yes, this, whatever is the answer. This is the answer. I don't know why, I don't know how, but this is the answer. So I started learning the art of lucha libre at the London School of Lucha Libre and I started performing as a Mexican wrestler in London and so that began a kind of a journey to where I am now.

06:54

Essentially, I had no idea when I started learning professional wrestling that where I would end up is running a global charity to end abuse and gymnastics, but I just knew that as I watched these athletic acrobatic men throw themselves around the ring in the context of a fight, there was something about the energy of conflict that I needed to embrace. I until that point I guess I'd been quite conflict avoidant. I had been hiding my skills quite a lot. I'd been feeling a lot of shame around actually being good at things. Like I'd get really, if I was good at something and someone would notice and compliment me, I would. I would get really triggered and think I was being gaslighted and stuff like that. So I don't know. I just saw in this Mexican wrestling art form a space where I would, I could potentially confront my issues, and so I've been doing that for seven years and it's ended up with me being in some interesting places.

07:53 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

I love that. It's funny because you talk about how you followed your joy and that led you to doing banana things right, Like things that take you out of your comfort zone, right? That is following your joy for you, is it?

08:06 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

Yeah, we've talked quite a lot about this idea over the last couple of years, right of stepping out of your comfort zone, and, yeah, one of the things I've learned through our conversations is that I have quite a specific relationship to what it means to be in or out of a comfort zone and because of the abuse and the highly I don't know what's the right word you know the highly disciplined system that I was educated in as a small gymnast, my comfort zone is like flip reverse of everyone else's, so it's my comfortable place. To be out of my comfort zone and for me to stay in a zone of comfort is very uncomfortable. There's a lot I don't enjoy about the world of professional wrestling, but what I have really enjoyed about it is its relationship to risk, probably in a similar way to parkour athletes. I think if you look into, like the, the philosophy behind parkour, and parkour involves a lot of risk, and they make that part of their philosophy. Actually, in terms of risk management, they say you know that your body has an ability to assess risk and and so you should trust that ability and that learning to assess risk is a really important part of doing parkour and I think for me that's what wrestling gave me is this sense that actually I've got these quite specific skills from gymnastics that I can throw myself off like the top of the ring and quite accurately hit a target and know that I'm going to be safe, even though I'm 42 years old and I'm throwing myself through the air like for me that's quite a safe thing to do.

09:48

But what isn't safe for me is exposing myself in front of a crowd of 2,000 people, like where I might do something wrong and feel embarrassed that I haven't got it perfectly right. So like what would be risky to someone else? Like you know, doing something that is potentially physically harmful. The level of control I have of my body actually means that that's not the risky part. The risky part is just letting people see that I can do that and not not hating myself when I look at pictures of me doing it. Um, because I've got some weird distortions about myself that are left over from me being screamed at as a 15-year-old.

10:32 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yes, that's because you do say that very valid point where in gymnastics everything is perfectionism. You have to get everything right. Right, that's kind of the training you got up until you were 16, which are very formative years of our lives. It's our childhood and that's what you were immersed in. More looking at the outward results, would you say more external motivation at that point, which kind of disconnected you from your joy, would you say that would be the case? and then being able to go into this type of sport where it's all about being out of control, but in control is that what you're saying?

11:12 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

yeah, so I would characterize um women's artistic gymnastics as as being primarily about perfection yes, whereas wrestling I would call the art of the fuck up like it's got aesthetic of the fucked that the more messed up it looks, the more the crowd are going to cheer and look on in horror and be exhilarated by the like oh my god, I can't believe that moment just happened and they landed on their backs and they're not dead. Yeah, whereas gymnastics is, you've got to land in a very specific position, not move your feet. You know the, the stick it kind of moment that everyone knows from gymnastics, like if you don't stick it, then you're screamed at and shouted at, whereas in wrestling, if you make anything look like you knew what you were doing, then you kind of got the whole thing wrong. So yeah, I'm very driven to do wrestling from that perspective that it's like a real fuck you to my Russian coach to be like I choose what I do with my body and right now I'm choosing to do it and make it look like it's not that great and that gives me some sense of reclaiming my skills in a weird way.

12:21 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yeah, it's very healing for you to do that, and it's also you mentioned conflict as well, seeing these people bring out their anger right, which is something you also tell us as students to be more angry in order to get these skills right. So it's exactly the same for you. So I find that really fascinating how you that took you, your joy, took you to somewhere that actually was there to heal you as well. So you said at the beginning, you said I was fed up of supporting others. I looked at something that would support me, and then with that experience in mind, you created something that actually is supporting a lot of people. So let's start with Reset Lab Fitness, which is the one that I know most right and the one that I have the most feedback about as well. What is your why behind Reset Lab Fitness? What are you wanting to teach the adults that you teach there?

13:20 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

So I think the why behind Reset Lab was when I met Tom, who is this mad Mexican wrestler. We connected around the joy of moving, and I think specifically what it is that I and he really enjoy about wrestling is there's a quality of touch. So, you know, there's lots of physical activities and physical

practices that you can do, that you do on your own, but wrestling requires you to make physical contact with other people. So there was something about the quality of the touch that we were exploring when we first started working with each other. And, for example, I went to a salsa class last night and I was enjoying being in the room and watching how the quality of touch that everybody experiences as you move from partner to partner is about experiencing sensuality, whereas in wrestling the quality of touch is much more about experiencing a sense of power and then performing aggression or conflict with that a sense of power and then performing aggression or conflict with that. So Reset Lab was sort of set up as an accompaniment to wrestling to explore the kinds of touch that were about power and sensuality, or about power and reclaiming confidence through movement. So as I began wrestling I realised that I was attracted to it because I had some healing work to do around the gymnastics but, to be totally honest, at that point I still didn't fully realise the full trauma that existed in my body around the gymnastics. But I just wanted to find a way of reclaiming my joy in gymnastics and the kinds of conditioning that I had learned as a young, young gymnast, and then also from my athletics training as well, and combine the things I loved from my athletics training with the things that I loved from my gymnastics training and then to be able to share that joy with other people through doing experimental movement practices that drew from Tom's experience in martial arts, where there's various different qualities of touch, and then my experience from gymnastics and just generally bringing in all the different movement practices that we'd both done over the years. And we put it into a melting pot really, and we started running these sessions that were about training the body, where it was largely about actually the, the companionship of the people that we were doing it with, because I think as an athlete in my 20s being a 400 metre hurdler or being a gymnast competition was everything.

15:53

So, particularly if I think about my training group as a 400 metre hurdler, I trained with some of the most incredible female athletes in the country. I adored them as competitors. I respected them as competitors. I respected them as competitors. I looked up to them. I wanted to be as fast as them.

16:14

They gave me something to feel motivated towards, to try to be as good as, but when we stepped on the track, we were always racing, and so there was something about the companionship that always had this competitive quality. So there was something about the companionship that always had this competitive quality. So I wanted to bring in all these training practices that I'd experienced before and loved, but bring them into a context where it was about companionship and teamwork and collaboration, which is really what wrestling is about, and I guess that's what I was. One of the things I was seeing in wrestling that I really loved was the collaboration and the fact that your job is to keep each other safe, in fact, and so I think that was probably one of the founding principles of what we were trying to do when we set up Reset Lab.

16:55 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

You've brought that aspect of community in the gymnastics classes as well, and that is big feedback that I got from the students who are being taught by you. They were saying that really some of the benefits that as an adult learning gymnastics and you have students that range from 20s to I think your oldest student was 70, something, right, um, they say that it really is an aspect of being in a positive, inclusive environment and working as a community, but also they talk about how it's helped them work through

self-doubt and fear and expand their comfort zone within that context. Because you need that context, don't you? Even as a person outside of the gymnastics class or the wrestling class, if you want to make any changes in your life or learn a new technique, you also need that positive community environment. So you're really good at teaching people within that context to improve and to push their limits. How do you do that? First of all, what do you see in your students when it comes to fear, when it comes to trusting themselves?

18:01 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

So I have students who range in age, ability level, fitness level, confidence level, and I just see each student as an individual and I see my job as to be the person to facilitate them, to increase their confidence levels enough that they can achieve what their body is physically capable of.

18:27

And maybe I do that through kind of having an inherent trust in them and their body.

18:34

Perhaps I trust them and their body more than they trust them and their body, and maybe that comes from just 30 years of being the person that was out there on their own racing on the track or performing a routine in front of judges on the beam.

18:50

Like I know what it is to have to deliver a performance in the moment when there's high stakes, when you're in a high stake situation, and I also know the feeling of being in a total flow state when you perform at your absolute best. I think still now some of my peak life experiences to date have been these moments where I've experienced total flow in a performance context got 20 better because my body and mind were in complete alignment and the disruptive voices that normally were talking in my head were quietened for a moment and I was able to just let my body do what it could naturally do, and so I guess, yeah, I'm always trying to create the conditions for my students to allow them to be in that state, rather than a shutdown state where they are inhibiting or stopping themselves from achieving what they're capable of.

19:53 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

You really do get people in that flow state. And before the flow state there's that struggle phase, right? How do you get your students to go through that struggle phase and how do you get them to trust themselves?

20:07 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

So I work with each student in the way that I think that they need. You know I don't get it right all the time, but I do my best to be attuned to what they need. And it may not. It may be that you know one session I notice they're not quite there, but I don't know how to fix it in that session, but the memory stays with me. And then a few sessions down the line, I make the correct intervention. But essentially what I'm always looking out for is is the student in a state of fight, flight, freeze or fawn, fawn and so all the normal fear responses? And then from that point I will try to speak to them and acknowledge and

ask them to acknowledge that they're in a fear response. And once we're both in a place where we can talk about the fact that there's a fear response on the table, then I try to give them options of things that will work and different things work for different people. So step one is always to ask them to kind of breathe and bring their attention into the room. You know, sometimes people get triggered and they might be crying. Or sometimes people get triggered and they just shut down, they go quiet, they take themselves off into the corner and I'll notice that, and then I'll try and get them to re-engage with the rest of the group. Or sometimes they'll be constantly apologising or, you know, fawning around kind of like trying to appease me that they're not doing a good enough job, and you know, then I'll notice that and be like, hey, you know, that's not the case, stop apologising, you're doing great. Let's get you into a positive mindset. So in each case, what I try to do is get them to breathe, place attention on where they're at in the moment and get them to have an awareness around the feelings that they're experiencing in their body. So for some people, their heart rate might go up and they might get exaggerated responses, as if they were going to, like, run away. Some people literally do run away and leave the class and I have to go back and pull them back in.

22:08

Sometimes people go into more of a numb state where they're like, actually, I can't feel my foot now, right now, or I can't, can't feel feelings in my body. So I just ask them okay, whatever this feeling is, just try to feel it and then communicate to me about what the feeling is. Explore the sensations in the body, because the sensations in the body will give you a lot of clues about how to solve the fear issues. So then I work with them to kind of say look, there's a part of you that is afraid, but that's not the whole part, right, because you're here, you're still doing the front somersault, you're still taking your turn and trying to do the front somersault, so like only one part of you is afraid. The other part is like having the time of your life, right. So let's try to identify which part is afraid and not read the situation as being like you're rubbish because you're feeling fear.

23:01

And then what people tend to do is like get really angry at themselves and be like oh no, I'm just. You know I'm not doing it right, I don't. I'm really cross that I'm feeling this way and I try to say no, bring the attention to the sensation. And then let's thank the fear, because the fear has a positive intention for you. It's there to keep you safe, and I always say I would much rather work with people who have fear than people that don't have fear, because the motherfuckers that come into my class with no fear nightmare like I'm having to watch them like a hawk. Um, they're, they're the ones that are going to hurt themselves and they don't have the normal fear responses that everybody else has. So I try to normalise these fear responses and be like it's completely sane and rational that you should have fear in this moment when I'm asking you to do a back somersault or I'm asking you to throw yourself backwards and do a back handspring, for example, because if you don't have a fear response, then it means your body is not doing all of the things that it should be doing to keep you safe. But if you want to participate in gymnastics, if you want to step out of your comfort zone, if you want to learn a new skill, you need to have a good dialogue between the fear that's trying to keep you safe and the desire that you have to do this new thing that's out of your comfort zone.

24:27

So I ask them at that point to basically broker a deal and find a way to include the fear, thank the fear, acknowledge the fear and also get what you want. So to say, for example, thank you so much to the part of me that is afraid to go backwards right now. I really appreciate you trying to keep me safe and I would really also love to get the high from stepping out of my comfort zone and doing this thing. That I know is difficult because I know once I've done it, that will bring me joy. So at that point I asked them to focus on the positive intention of what it is that they want to do, the joy or the pride that they're going to feel from being able to do this trick. And so then I asked them to hold these two positions, these two parts themselves, which are kind of in conflict, and I asked them to look at how they're not really in conflict, that the fear is not in conflict with the part of them that wants to do it. It's just that those two parts need to work together.

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So once we've done that, then I tend to say let's try making a regression to make a progression. So we regress to progress and by regressing the activity, taking a step backwards and say if you're learning a backflip, say we do a supported backflip, we get two people to support you doing the backflip. By doing that it gives you a feeling of control again so that you can keep the breath in control, your heart rate doesn't go crazy, you don't go into the fight, flight, freeze, fawn, response, and instead you go one step back, regain control. Once you've regained control, then you can begin to build again, this time with the two parts of yourself in unison, working together to achieve the thing that you both want to achieve. So once I've got people in that state, I then sort of get them to do a number of things. One is to visualise. Visualisation of what you want to achieve really works.

26:30

I also ask them to take note of the voices that they're hearing, like what's the fear saying and what's the part of them saying that really wants to do the thing that they're trying to learn, the thing that they're trying to learn. And then after that, once they've then maybe done the thing that was really hard and scary once or twice, then we begin to focus on the fact that it's repetition and it's building the muscle and getting the movement in the muscle that is going to allow them to have confidence long term around this new competency. So, for example, somebody's just learned a round off, full twisting somersault and they've done one and it's gone well. Then we celebrate it's gone well, everybody cheers, we're all, as a community, excited about it. But also then I'll work with them over the next six weeks to say okay.

27:20

So for the next few sessions, I want you to do five of these in each session, because the repetition is what will build the confidence, so that the next few sessions I want you to do five of these in each session, because the repetition is what will build the confidence, so that the doubt, the self-doubt, starts to dissipate. And so, yeah, it's really about.. I just ask my students to be open. I really don't mind what level they come in at, just that they be open about when they feel the fear, so that we can then work with the fear. And by them being open, it allows me to team them up with other people that I know are real good cheerleaders in the group, and that's one thing I love about our sessions is that you know that you've always got people in a room who are very others orientated and who are really good at celebrating other people's wins. Usually the people that are a bit more, you know, not so good at that skill. It's because they have so much internal dialogue that they're not good enough, that they're not

capable, that they need to do better. So I try to team people up that seem to have a lot of internal dialogue versus those that are really good at supporting other people. And then it means that the cheerleaders can get really involved in that person's journey and do the cheerleading for them that they find so difficult to do for themselves.

28:33

And one thing that I really do is that, for example, if I, if I give you an example of a session I had a few weeks ago, I had two guys in the session. One guy was doing backflips and he was saying to me I'm really afraid, this is really scary for me. And the other guy was doing a more difficult movement, but I could see he was experiencing some fear, but he was not telling me. So I asked each of them what they were telling themselves, and the one who was being open with me he said, well, I'm saying, yeah, I'm afraid, but just fucking do it. And so I tried to work particularly with men to say that mantra of feel the fear and do it anyway, like you can do that, sure, and it works for lots of people.

29:21

But there's also other options.

29:23

There are other options about what you can tell yourself. There are other ways of getting over the block when your body goes into total freeze and says I can't go backwards. Right now this is too scary, but with the guy who was isolating himself and not talking about the fear, he's now regressed a little bit and it's going to take a few weeks to get him back to where he was because he he wasn't in the moment able to share what was going on for him, and so I wasn't able to give an intervention that would have helped him. So we're now a few weeks later and he hasn't done the move for a few weeks and now he thinks he can't do it, you know. So not sharing the fear actually makes progress a lot slower. Essentially, my, my tips are be open about the fear, welcome the fear, don't be afraid of the fear, and honour your fear and see its positive intention, and then communicate with others about the fear, and if you do all those things, you can do anything that you want in life I love that.

30:21 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

that was very extensive and complete explanation, and I'd like to go back on a few points. Like you say, it's important to acknowledge the fear, to name fear and to know that it's there for a reason and also to feel it because you know it's normal. Our brain kind of has this bank of experiences and it deems anything that hasn't been done before as something that will kill it, basically. So, if you have never gone backwards, your body is going to be afraid and, as you say, it would be abnormal not to be afraid and there are people who are not right and that's another problem, as you were saying. But your body is there too because it's signalling this, this being afraid, and it's learning to harness it and to look at those different parts. I like the part work that you do as well, saying it's not everything, it's one part of you and so it's leaning into that fear, but step by step. You were saying about taking it a step down and regressing and creating a safe environment for people to move forward, and I feel you know sports is such a great analogy for life in general, because it's the exact same thing in every life situation where you might, you know, have the fear of going for this new job or public speaking or doing a podcast interview, and you're going to get the same physical sensations in your body, and employing those techniques that you're

talking about and being with your body and really feeling what it's saying and then working with it is really important.

31:57

Okay, so just give me one second.

31:58

I need to pause the interview here for a moment.

32:00

This is Dannie from the future talking to you because, actually, hindsight is such a wonderful thing to see how what Claire was talking about was so relevant in my own experience, because doing podcast interviews is a new experience for my brain and therefore is scary.

32:19

Instead of feeling the fear, naming it, acknowledging it, I chose to feel the fear and do it anyway, and I lost my train of thought and what we did was de-escalate the situation by laughing and starting the conversation again. By saying all of this, I just want to stress that we are all human, we are all living a messy human experience and that it is normal to feel fear. We all go through it and we all learn to cope with it, one step at a time. Now there are some questions missing here, but what we did basically was to go back to that idea of acknowledging the fear and how it showed up in the two men she was talking about early on. So I invite you to pay attention to what Claire is saying here and think about it in the context of your own life and how perhaps pushing through the fear has led you to regress or self-sabotage.

33:23 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

He's like such a manly man and this one thing is doing backflips. Going backwards was so scary for him, but he was really open about how afraid he was, so that made it really a joy to work with him.

Dannie Reeve:

Because he acknowledged what was going on in his body, right?

Claire Heafford (Guest)

Yeah, and he told me. I said what are you telling yourself? He said just do it. And he was saying you know this, telling myself just to do it doesn't help me get over the fear. I can make myself do it, but it doesn't make it any less scary each time.

33:52 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Right okay, feeling the fear and doing it anyway is not always the best approach, because it's actually forcing your body to go into even more Fight flight freeze. Is that what you're saying? Yeah, yeah exactly.

34:15 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

I'm always trying to de-escalate the fight-flight situation. So, for example, I went to an adult gymnastics session on Monday night with some of our students at a different venue and there were some really small kids in the facility. So I watched a little girl, seven, eight, nine years old, on the beam doing a backward walkover and she was crying. So she's standing on the beam in position ready to do her backward walkover and she was crying and I was on the other side of the room looking at her going oh no, I like I know this feeling, I know why she's afraid and the coach wasn't shouting or anything, but I felt really like my instinct was to take her off the beam and I would have been saying to her hey, like, whatever's going on for you right now, let's talk about it, because you're in a place of fear and you don't.

35:10

We don't need you to be in that place to achieve this skill. Let's de-escalate the situation. Let's make you laugh, let's get you to a place of feeling why you love gymnastics, what's fun for you. Let's get you to do something you feel confident in. Let's build your confidence on that and then let's go back to the skill and say how could we do this in a way where you would feel confident to do it. So yeah, for me it's always about de-escalation around the fear responses, because once you're into those uncontrollable fight, flight, freeze, fawn responses, you don't have options anymore, and my goal is to always get you to a place of you having the most options possible is to always get you to a place of you having the most options possible.

36:03 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

So it's managing the fear rather than actually trying to fight the fear. So how about? Because obviously you're able to teach this to people, so it's something that you've applied to yourself. What role models did you have growing up that really taught you to be more confident in yourself and to manage your fears better?

36:25 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

Oh good, question. I think I probably didn't have enough role models, like a lot of what I'm teaching because no one taught it to me. It's stuff I learned the hard way through 30 years of competitive sport and all the damage it did to me. I often refer to myself as a recovering athlete, so I guess I'm teaching from that place of trying to positively share what I've learned. But in terms of the good role models, I think it would be a number of the coaches that I had in athletics. There were two coaches in particular, a lovely man called Fred, who just turned 100 this year and he was a very gentle, very gentle man. He was in his 70s when he was coaching, 70s, 80s when he was coaching me. He was just always there for me when he was coaching me, he was just always there for me. And I think that so much of confidence comes from your attachment styles and I have some, you know, not fantastically healthy attachment styles due to my father leaving me when I was a baby and then the experiences that I had of emotional abuse in gymnastics. So I think that the regularity of knowing that my coach was there for me on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays every week, come rain or shine was huge. So that was all about in my 20s, building relationships with people that were very much based around a fixed schedule. And I look back on that time now and I feel really privileged that that I found somebody that was there for me

in that way and I think, because of what they gave to me, that's why I'm able to give to my students now, because it created a well of you know, somebody putting money in the bank of me and believing in me and saying, yeah, you can get better, you can keep getting better, you can keep getting better.

38:20

So his whole thing was that he'd been a veteran of the Second World War and he had a number of mantras. One was don't stand on ceremony. Which kind of was? You know, 400 metre hurdlers. In the 400 metre hurdles you're running around the track. It's bad enough that you've got to run 400 metres fast because you're sprinting, but there's barriers in the way and this coach would refer to the hurdles as the barriers he would say don't stand on ceremony, you just get yourself over that barrier without worrying. And he would do things like we'd be running at the hurdles and he would deliberately walk across the track because he would want to make sure that nothing would divert us and that, no matter what, we'd just clear the barrier.

39:03

And I think that that was a nice metaphor for life, because in the 400 metre hurdles you've got to get to the finish line, but you've also got to get over 10 barriers. But you've also got to get over 10 barriers and invariably eight girls start the race, but not all eight girls finish the race, because someone hits a hurdle and falls over. And so it means that you have to break the race down into these 10 moments, and I think that I've kind of taken that into my life, that no matter how big the challenge, I go right. What are the moments along the way? How do I break this down to make it feel more manageable and how do I manage my energy within each of those moments so that I can still make it to the finish line without collapsing?

39:49

And then another role model would be I had a wonderful coach, a 400 metre coach, but he also had an athlete that he'd been training for track athlete. She'd run fast 400 flat races, she was transitioning to the hurdles and she was emotionally grounded. She was better than me and she had a beautiful relationship with our coach. There was a lovely friendship there, there was trust, mutual respect, and I just kind of tried to get into her that's her slipstream and the relationship that she had with him and I felt well, if I could just keep up with her, I could see she trusted the coach and so I guess I learned to trust my coach that way.

40:51

But yeah, I think it's all to do with attachment patterns actually, and so perhaps that's really what I'm trying to foster in our sessions is community as a place where you get the support that perhaps you didn't get from your parents, and particularly around physicality, because you know I've had a baby in the last few years and being in the park with kids, you really notice that a lot of parents don't give the kids the kind of encouragement and non-anxiety responses that foster security and confidence in physicality. So I guess in a way I'm trying to do kind of a parenting role, of providing people in the group with encouragement and a sense of self-belief that maybe their own parents didn't give them when they were little kids.

41:44 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

And actually a coach plays a big role when it comes to that right? You left gymnastics, where you didn't have great role models there, not all of them. You actually went into athletics and got a father figure that was a very secure father figure who gave you that confidence to go out in the world and that is what a father is there for, to give you that confidence. And you also had the backup of this other hurdler who you really admired and who inspired you, and that was such a gift after having your needs not met, and that's what you can now translate into becoming a coach yourself. What is it that the little girl would have needed in her gymnastics career and wasn't given when it comes to managing her fears and her confidence?

42:37 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

That question's gonna make me cry oh um, that, that's a that's a really tough one to answer because of what I experienced in gymnastics um what she would have needed was, um, yeah, for there to be more focus on the joy.

42:58

I guess what I tried to do with my students, which is that she would have needed to have been seen as unique and that when she was being coached, she would have been growing in all sorts of different directions to become the person she needed to be. Not what I experienced, which was a kind of cookie cutter approach to trying to create gymnasts. Which is a gymnast is x, y and z. They must be perfect and if you're not fitting the mold, then the coach is trying to slash off bits of you that are inconvenient to them. It's like the complete opposite of nurturing.

43:38

Yeah, the little girl in me really, really would have needed to have been nurtured and given a lot more space for autonomy, joy, and given credit that, even though she was 10 years old or 15 years old, that she had all sorts of abilities to solve problems herself and didn't need an authoritarian coach laying down unnecessary rules about what wasn't possible for her.

44:06

Because the reality is that if you can create the conditions in another person to have self-belief, confidence, to feel secure and to feel, allow their joy to come through their physicality, then that person is going to be able to achieve things that the coach can't imagine, like. How arrogant of a coach to believe that their athlete is only capable of what the coach can imagine for them. That is not the case. You know, humans are infinitely incredible, amazing individuals and are made up of thousands of experiences in their lives, and the coaches are only part of a few of those moments. So the coach's job should be to trust that if they can create a safe space for the athlete, then the athlete will be capable of more than anyone could possibly know. And so I think that, as a coach, that's an exciting place to be, and I would never want to put limits on what someone can do.

45:14 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

I love that. I love that you actually connected with that joy that that little girl needed, right. And it's come full circle because, again, you know, when we started the interview, you were saying how it was a point

in your life when you started Reset Lab, fitness or just before, where you wanted to focus more on your joy and what you wanted. You were kind of meeting those little girl's needs and you've actually created a company that's called play fight. So there's an element of play and an element of joy which is really beautiful that you've been able to bring that into your life today, right. So, I want to acknowledge you for that, because it is really commendable to have gone through everything you've gone through and to have reaped the benefits, to have learned from it and then to be able to teach that to other people. Um, not everybody does that. Some people, you know, are still trying to figure out things for themselves, and we're all trying to figure out things for ourselves. But, yeah, thank you for sharing that.

46:18 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

Yeah, I'd very, I'd very much like to make the point. I don't have it all figured out. If you see me in a wrestling session where I'm trying to learn something that's out of my comfort zone, I'll be in the corner crying. I'll be telling myself all sorts of unhelpful things. You know my poor training partners they, they, they know, they know me at my worst they, yeah, but that you're allowing that worse to come out.

46:40 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Right, you're allowing the messiness to come out, which is very different.

46:44 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

It's different. Yeah, I don't know if all of them can cope with it, but, yeah, I'll deal with it anyway, because I figured that like there's there's no point in trying to hide it because, uh, as I say, with my experience in my 20s with my female training partners on the track, I have so much love and admiration for them 20 years later and for that moment in our lives where we got to hang out with, like these warrior women who I've never met, women with so much kind of mental fortitude and determination. And so now with my training partners, yeah, I want to foster really authentic relationships and be like, look, this is just who I am and like, deal with it. If you can't deal with it, then we can't get the most out of this partnership. And I also really want to value my training partners now as like really significant, important people in my life, because I miss so much the friendships that I had with those women in my 20s and I'm not really in touch with them now and they're not really part of my life now because my life is in a different place and you know we don't necessarily share the same interests.

47:47

But it does mean that the training partners that I have around me now. I really, really want to make them aware of how important they are to me and that it is almost like a family relationship, because often when we're doing physical activities, if we're training for something, we end up spending more time with those people than we do our families, and so why not acknowledge, actually, the importance of those people? And sometimes it's people you don't necessarily share their politics, you don't necessarily share their outlook. You know, a lot of my training partners now are 25 year old men and it's hard for them to really empathise with the experiences of a 42 year old mum. But there are some parts of us that are in alignment and I want to be grateful for the parts of us that are all on the same page and acknowledge that the fun that we have is equally uplifting for us, no matter what the differences are.

48:45 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

and the fun is the most important part, the fun in the process, is that what you're saying?

48:47 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

Yeah, the fun is the most important part. And one of the things I noticed over the years is, you know, I got really interested in high performance states at one time and I read a lot of biographies, autobiographies of athletes and was paying attention to what they would say about how they achieved, you know, like Olympic winning results, and I started to notice that people who were achieving at a high level fell into two categories those that were using God as a reason why they were able to achieve things and those that were not using god. So lots of people were religious and would say you know, I, I. You know Jonathan Edwards, for example. At one stage he didn't even compete on Sundays because it was Sunday and he was a christian. And then at a certain moment in time he managed to be flexible enough because he couldn't win the olympic gold without competing on Sunday. So he began competing on Sunday Each time it was.

49:40

You know, I do this in honour of my God and, like his, my relationship with him, and you know, they kind of make the performance about something outside of them, something greater than them. Or, you know, and other people be like, my gift is God given. You know, I'm honouring God and blah, blah, blah. And then there were the people that didn't make it about god. For them, they would describe much more their ability to to channel again an experience that was greater than them. They were just channelling energy through their body. But the minute that you put pressure on yourself, you don't get such high level performances. You just can't. But there are people in the sports world who are able to just do it for pure love and joy. And if you can focus on the pure love and joy that you experience and the fun that you have in the process, it really doesn't matter what the outcome is. And so once you're not focused on the outcome, the outcomes take care of themselves.

50:31 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

I love that, that that is so true and so difficult for most of us, a lot of us get so in our heads.

50:41 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

It's amazing how easy the answer is and yet how difficult that is to achieve it is .

50:47 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Right, and I'm just thinking. Even in everyday life, even recording a podcast, even doing anything, it's so important to have this out, doing it for something greater than us, but then it's so easy to get caught up in ourselves.

Claire Heafford (Guest)

yep, so easy to get caught up in that idea that everybody else cares so deeply about what we are or are not doing, and it's really hard to remember the reality that most people are so focused on themselves they don't give a damn what you are, what are not doing. And so at the end of the day, yes, the, the right answer is always what's going to bring you joy in this moment. And do that because that's never wrong and because if you're experiencing joy, your body's vibrating at a higher frequency and you're more able to share that higher frequency with other people, and it will lift their spirits too. And then you start to create these positive feedback loops of everybody experiencing more positivity and, um, yeah, I don't think there's really too much else to life other than trying to do that.

51:58 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

It's so true. Do you experience joy now when you're doing gymnastics?

52:02 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

oh my god, I, I love, I love practising for myself.

52:06

So I took some of our students on monday night to a club where I could train with a pit and a tumble track and yeah, for me it's absolutely my happiest place is at the top of a double back somersault about to land in the pit.

52:20

Like time goes into slow motion when I'm upside down spinning in the air and I land in the pit and then I pop up like a little lemur out of the pit with this huge smile on my face because I can't contain the joy that I'm feeling and I think that that's probably quite contagious and it makes other people feel like, yeah, okay, I want to feel that too. And then you know, it was such a lovely experience this week taking my reset lab students to another gym but continuing with that teamwork spirit and supporting each other emotionally to try new things and just have fun. So, yeah, I try and experience the joy in that way, for sure, and I get a lot of joy from from helping others to feel that too in the gymnastic sessions.

Dannie Reeve (Host)

That's great and I think your little girl, if she were watching you right now, which I'm sure she is, would be really proud and really happy.

53:13

I hope so. I mean the way I'm at a period in my life now where I'm 42 and I just think I'm preparing for the things that I'll be doing when I'm 62, that I hope 62-year-old me is still doing a lot of the stuff I'm doing now. And if I do that, if I maintain longevity and the ability to get pleasure out of my body and experience joy with my body doing these mad things that I love to do, the longer I can go on doing that, the more impact. I'm trying to think of it. Instead of being scared about ageing or being down on myself that I'm getting older, I'm now trying to think of it longer term and like, okay, well, every decade that

goes by is going to be another decade where I can create more impact by just carrying on doing the things that I love doing.

54:11 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

oh, I love that, and I think it's such a great way to close the interview, because that is a great message for everybody to take on as well. Age is just a number and if you continue with your joy, then life will take you wherever you're meant to go, and that's such a great way to end this chat with you. I would love to continue, but I know that your time is precious. Just wanted to ask you a last question, but before that I will put in the show notes all the details for where to find you If you guys are in the UK. If you want to go to have a session with claire, totally recommend anything else that you would like to to share, where we can connect with you?

54:50 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

Yeah, just to say, if you're somebody who had the misfortune of experiencing abuse in gymnastics, then please take a look at gymnasts for change. We're now a registered charity in the uk and we're being funded to roll out a two-year program to support people who are coming forward to discuss and disclose the very unsafe coaching practices that have been used for decades in the sport. So if that's you, if you've been affected by that, please reach out. Please come and take part and join our network and help us to change the way that the sport is coached.

55:15 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Great. Thank you for that, and I just have one last question for you, and this is a bit more of a creative question. So, claire, it's many, many years from now, you're maybe 100 and something, and you're still doing gymnastics, but it's your last day and your soul is just about to leave your body and you meet this being whose job is to prep the other souls that are coming into this earth and to give them some important messages. If that being was to ask you for three important truths to pass on in the next generation of souls who are going to be living their joy on earth, what would those truths be?

55:56 - Claire Heafford (Guest)

Oh, three truths. Dance and feel your joy through dance. And maybe your joy isn't dance, so maybe your joy is flips or running or whatever. But you know, embrace your physicality in whatever way possible. Be curious. Curious people do better. Curious people have better quality lives because they're always asking better quality questions. People have better quality lives because they're always asking better quality questions. And just be kind and open hearted and look for connections.

56:22 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Thank you. Those were great lessons for the next source to come in. So thank you so much, Claire. Thank you for being on the show. Thank you so much for having me.

And there you have it for today's episode guys. Thank you so much for listening. Claire, Once again, thank you so much for being on the show, It was an honour to have you.

56:42

Claire is an absolute warrior of a person and she is definitely doing what she's doing for a greater good and is creating a better future for the world of gymnastics and the world of sports altogether. We definitely need more people like that in the world, and I hope it inspires you to continue on whatever soul mission you are on as well. I am sending you so much love and I wish you the most flawsome day ever. To find out more about what I do and how I can best serve you, head over to www.danniereave.com and meanwhile, why not hit that subscribe button so you can be notified when the latest episode drops in? I promise the journey will be worth it.