

Dr Justine Reilly (00:07):

Okay. So welcome to our first 'In Conversation With...' chats, with people who are involved in and passionate about sporting heritage. And today, we're delighted to be joined by one of our fabulous sporting heritage ambassadors, three times Olympic silver medallist, winner in four world championships and two world records, plus an MBE. And I understand an amazing chef, Great Britain rower Frances Houghton. Frances. Hello.

Frances Houghton MBE (00:30):

Hi, Justin. Great to be here. I can't believe I'm the first one on, this is great.

Dr Justine Reilly (00:34):

We are so excited that you are here. And as I've said do go easy with me, so, um, I want you to start really just finding out how things have been for you for this last year and how you've got through and yeah, just how you've survived during the pandemic. Yeah.

Frances Houghton MBE (00:50):

And it's been so different for everyone, hasn't it? Everyone's got a different story, a different experience. Um, I certainly feel like one of the lucky ones. I live down in Cornwall normally, but when the first lock down was announced, I decided to go and stay with my mum, who's about 81, I think. And she was like, oh no, you don't, you know, you don't need to come up. And I said, well, actually it's a bit for me as well, because she has a lovely garden. And, um, so actually it was a really special time I worked from home anyway. Um, I was able to continue working from home, at her home and, you know, work really well for both of us. So, for me actually, it's, it's been quite nice. It's an opportunity to press pause, to reflect on things in my life so far. And, um, that certainly worked well for me when I had opportunities in my career to press pause and assess things and work out how to move forward. And I think it's just been a really, really has had positive sides for me.

Dr Justine Reilly (01:50):

Oh, that's so interesting because yeah, I think a lot of people have said that as well as it being a really difficult time, it's given opportunities to just take a bit of a step back and work differently. So, it's really interesting that you're saying that because you've obviously had such a packed career and you've been doing so much so long. Do you think that has really benefited you for thinking about what's next?

Frances Houghton MBE (02:16):

Yeah, it has, and I think it's, you know, we all work incredibly hard don't we and we're all really busy. And I think when you're suddenly confronted with some rules that say you can't travel and you can't, you know, be really social and actually your day fills up anyway, you think hang on a minute. Like how much was I trying to squeeze in? And I feel really tired at the end of the day having, you know, actually just put some real thought into, into less stuff. So, I think it has been really beneficial. Um, and I think to be able to reflect deeply on the things that we've done and to think actually, what do I really value out of what I've done in my life so far? What do I, what am I actually missing and what am I surprisingly not missing? I think that really helps us shape more constructively what we want going forward. Um, you know, and in the context of sporting heritage, I think, you know, we can, we can look back and think, Oh, you know, do I, you know, actually I do really miss sport or, you know, going through things at home, you know what I want to keep this and I want to keep that that's really, you know, those memories that come back, it's amazing.

Dr Justine Reilly (03:24):

Oh, I mean, that's brilliant, you know, to hear you sort of reflect on that and see that, that importance the value of it. And I mean, I suppose it links on to what I really want to talk to you about, which is your book, um, learning from five Olympics games, I mean, crikey five Olympic games. Um, and I was looking at some of the things that people have described about it, so, too valuable not to share, absolutely beautiful, absolutely fascinating, and really, I just want to talk, you know, if you could share what's the inspiration behind it.

Frances Houghton MBE (03:53):

Oh, wow. Well actually, um, you know, my dad was a teacher and he instilled in me how important it is to pass on your experiences and your, and your knowledge in any way that you can to help others have a really good experience themselves in whatever they're doing. Um, and you'll, you'll see from the image here that it's not really a standard book. It's not a normal biography. I really wanted to distil the learnings that I had gathered over my career to pass on to the next generation so that they could have the most fulfilling, not only successful. I mean, there are lots of tips that important pragmatic stuff about performing in sport in there, but a fulfilling journey whilst doing that as well. Um, and I think as I say, that came from my dad, like the importance of passing on. Um, so that, that was really the urge behind it.

Frances Houghton MBE (04:50):

Um, I didn't realize that so many people would be interested in, um, in reading it themselves. And I'm delighted that they are, people have said, oh, you know, it's like stumbling across an Olympian's notebook. And that's exactly what I wanted it to be like, you know, it's broken up with pictures. It's my own illustrations that, you know, that I put in. And I had, you know, as in my notebook, but when I was training for Rio, like reminding myself about important things for performance or for perspective, um, and actually initially that my motivation behind it was to produce, uh, an accumulation of my learnings into this, into this thing to give to a few coaches, a few friends, a few members of my family to say, thank you, thank you for helping me learn what I learned and for helping me get over the line. And then that the last couple of years, because it was, it was tough trying to get into the big games. I'm not going to lie. You know, I was going grey all in my peakest hour. Um, but you know, a lot of people really helped me along the way. And I wanted to give this as a gift to them to say, thank you for their help.

Dr Justine Reilly (05:59):

Oh, I mean it's amazing, isn't it? So, it's kind of an article of sporting heritage, brought to life showing why it is valuable for the future and what you can learn from it. Erm.

Frances Houghton MBE (06:10):

Absolutely. And I think the important thing for me is for, you know, for the next generation of athletes, this is, you know, it's just a conversation starter. I'm not saying this is a handbook of how to do it. The next generation, their contexts will be really, really different. And it'll probably be fascinating to them, well I hope it will be in some way. Interesting. They'll think, oh, you know, you felt like that, you know, we don't, we don't describe stuff like that now. Or, you know, the, the photos of us training or, you know, I've got, um, a photo of me in Beijing when I was really disappointed to win Silver and a photo in Rio and I'm absolutely delighted to win silver, but even that, you know, you can, you can look back and think, Oh right. You know, things just look different

or sound different the way we describe the training might be different. And I just, you know, it's a moment in time. Um, and I think that's why it's so important to capture those when you can,

Dr Justine Reilly (07:02):

Oh, I mean, just hearing you talk about it, it's amazing because you're right. It's we speak, speak often about how sporting heritage tells those wider social and economic and political stories. When you look at those pictures and you see the differences in what people are wearing or the different processes that people went through. And I guess the book is, is demonstrating that.

Frances Houghton MBE (07:25):

Yeah. And, you know, I find it funny looking back at pictures of me and Sydney because of the Olympics. I went to a Sydney, Athens, Beijing, London, and Rio. And when you think of, of heritage, I mean those five games alone, I mean, Sydney, to me, strikes memories of, you know, newness, and you know, a nation that just loves sport and it's just, you know, really free flowing. And then you've got Athens. I mean, obviously the heritage of Athens, you know, the home of the Olympic games and to compete in a place where you felt like you were at the start of it all. I mean, you almost felt like you were at the ancient games, and you know, those, those, um, those stadia, those original stadia to be around, you know, to be around that, that feeling and those memories and, and where it all began.

Frances Houghton MBE (08:10):

And then Beijing, where, you know, there was so much a celebration of culture. And that absolutely was a moment in time. I think Beijing and then London, I mean, the way that we put London together in the way that we used our cultural stories, you know, that opening ceremony, the way that the nation came together, the way that it created memories for so many people in our nation. And I remember there were times before London that I was really struggling and I thought I'm not going to make the team, but I really want to make it because I want my friends and my family and the wider public here to understand, to experience the Olympics, being around them and to think, oh, I get it now. And I understand why you put yourself through so much training to be a part of it. And then they, you know, so many volunteers could be a part of it as well and tell their own stories about it. I mean, I remember my dad, he volunteered as a driver for a commentary car and yeah, my cousin got married. I think he did the Paralympics as well as the Olympics. So, I had finished competing, but he came to my cousin's wedding, and he was so proud to turn up in his volunteer's uniform.

Dr Justine Reilly (09:21):

That's amazing. Do you have a picture?

Frances Houghton MBE (09:24):

Oh yeah. We'll have a picture. Yeah. He was just so proud to be a part of it. And to be able to ask him about that and his experiences of that, his perspective, or he would have had a different perspective on it to any competitor or any spectator. And I just think, um, you know, to be able to appreciate those different cultural contexts, you know, then we went on to Rio, which was, you know, kind of a festival in a carnival of colour. You know, it didn't have the money that Beijing had. It didn't have, you know, the structure that we had in London, but every single, um, competition was unique. And I think if we can capture that and keep it alive by sharing those memories, that's so important.

Dr Justine Reilly (10:07):

Oh, you said so many things in there. You know, the, the things around those changes and differences between the different Olympic games that you've seen, and you've witnessed, all of those is, is fascinating and tells that legacy of sport and the development of sport. And then the things around, you touched on often the people who aren't athletes, who are so valuable and so important, and I kind of wanted to ask you about. Within your book it sounds like there's been a lot of people who have been an inspiration to you. Um, and that throughout your career, that's kind of driven you to these amazing successes. So, I wanted to ask how important were those people, um, to you throughout?

Frances Houghton MBE (10:51):

Yeah. So many people from the beginning to the very end, you know, you really, even if you're at an individual sport, you really don't do it alone and I wouldn't want to have done it alone. You know, it's the people when you cross the line and you can look someone in the eye and say, this is what we did together. That is what sport, and the best bit of sport is about to me. And I remember there was, um, uh, uh, rowing coach that I didn't know that well, actually, but he came up to me about halfway, through my career and he said, oh, Frances, I'd really like to try and help you. Can I help you? I know we don't know each other, but you know, I can really see that, you know, there's more that you can give. And I always remember a quote he said to me, um, and I've put it on the back of my book, actually on the cover.

Frances Houghton MBE (11:35):

He said, if there's a book of mistakes, you need to make between where you are now and where you want to get to keep turning the page. I think you've got encouragement from people, you know, uh, you know, often, you know, we're all trying to work hard, and we all want to get places and, you know and improve. But in sport we can form relationships with people where we are just trying to create something together. And it doesn't, we don't have to win we're exploring the possibility of what we can do together. And I have had so much help from so many different people, you know, without sport, I would have been a very quiet, a very socially difficult introvert. I probably would have been pretty immobile. I'm very happy reading a book I've found rowing because I was absolutely useless at everything else.

Frances Houghton MBE (12:29):

And to think that people sort of took me on board. And I remember the first thing that my school's walks teacher said to me, you know, we went out on a, like a cross-country run. Goodness knows why I did it. I must've been told I had to, because my dad was going to be late picking me up or something. And he just says, good for you. You know, I came last, I was useless, but he just, and he gave that little bit of encouragement. And I remember when we went to London as athletes, we were given two tickets to be able to, you know, to friends or family, to be able to come and watch. And because both of my parents were volunteering, I gave my ticket to that PE teacher because I said, you know, without you, I never ever would have done any sport at all. But you gave me that first little bit of encouragement that said, it doesn't matter if you're useless, good for you, you know, come and enjoy it with us. We'll wait for you at the end. It's oranges for everyone.

Dr Justine Reilly (13:22):

Oh, that is amazing. And in a nutshell, that's it, isn't it? I mean, without him, you wouldn't, we wouldn't be here having this conversation. All of those experiences. Yeah. That, I mean, that is amazing when you consider all of those different people that are there's little points along the way,

and you know, you, you, you said it all there, and I kind of thought in terms of how your book supports others, I think you're saying this as we're going along as well, obviously it's there to support high level athletes and anybody else who's at that kind of level, but how do you think this can support, because I think it definitely can, other people in terms of mindset and achieving their goals and thinking about it, right?

Frances Houghton MBE (14:06):

Yeah. You're right. I mean, the focus of the book, isn't really about rowing. There's very little about rowing in that it's much more about how we approach stuff, our mindset about self-awareness about understanding others. It's all the other stuff, except for technique and training, it's all the stuff around the sides. Um, but maybe I didn't understand the importance of in my first couple of games, whereas, you know, towards the end I was like, okay, we all sit on the line as equals. And that there's a whole lot of other stuff that really makes a difference. And that really applies to life outside of sport because I see that, you know, all of us, we're all working really hard and above all, let's make hard work, worth it, you know? And that's the thing that I really try and get across in my book is that, you know, halfway through my career, I've really changed my mindset from I've got a win to how can this be really fulfilling because I'm putting a whole load of work in here and I want to stand on that.

Frances Houghton MBE (15:07):

Ultimately the ultimate experience would be to stand on that podium and feel so much joy, not relief, it's over, not just, oh, look, I've got this thing in my hand, but I feel really fulfilled about what I've done with these people around me and what we've created together. And, um, so yeah, I mean, I think there's, there's so much in there for anyone who's trying to make the most out of themselves. Um, because it's not just about the task at hand, it's about how we approach it. It's about understanding ourselves. Um, and it's about understanding others because we all get into tricky situations, whether it's at home trying to negotiate, who's going to take the bins out in the rain or we're at work and someone's got to give the presentation and we're all nervous that it's a horrible thing to do, but managing your nerves, managing difficult conversations, staying calm, all of those kinds of things, to be honest, whether it's the Olympic gold medal or it's everyday life, it all boils down to the same simple stuff.

Frances Houghton MBE (16:10):

And if we can just keep, my mantra is just keep doing the fundamental basics exceptionally well. And we'd put ourselves in the best position each day to make good decisions, to feel calm, to, you know, do the best job that we can because we are who we are. And you know, when I sat on that start line, I just had to believe what is inside of me is enough. And so, if I feel guilty about not taking the bins out, I'm going to say what's inside of me is enough because it doesn't matter either way, you know, we all who we are.

Dr Justine Reilly (16:43):

Oh, do you know if that is such an important message, isn't it? And we forget, we forget, and we do get overtaken by, Oh I've got to do this, or I must excel here, but actually you're right. That isn't a sensible way to live life.

Frances Houghton MBE (16:59):

I think when we have these moments to pause and reflect, like, you know, we started this conversation about how valuable has it been to have time to pause and reflect? And we actually

assess, okay, what are the good days? Or what are the things that really lead me to get myself in a pickle? And then we can really learn, but until we stop and assess and, you know, and, and, and really kind of build up a picture of what a good, what it takes us to have a good day, or what, you know, what do we really want more of and what do we want less of, um, you know, that's the opportunity to do that.

Dr Justine Reilly (17:35):

Aw, do you know Francis, I am, I'm totally set to be following that mindset because I definitely need to start shifting towards that. Um, and I think it's really good advice, you know, so if people would like to go and buy your book, which I imagine they're all now trying to work out how to do that, how would they do that? How do they go about, erm?

Frances Houghton MBE (17:56):

Thank you. Well, I've self-published. Um, so, you know, me being me, I wanted it to be 100% true to my learnings and my experiences and present it in a way that, um, is a little bit different. So, you know, it's actually got, um, lots of graphs and, um, pictures and stuff, it's, you know, it's really colourful and different. So, it's only available through my website, which is www.franceshoughton.co.uk. And that's Frances with an E and then Houghton, H O U G H T O N.

Dr Justine Reilly (18:29):

Oh, that's brilliant Frances. And we will try and put that in an edit at the bottom so people can easily access it. Um, so I wanted to move on to talk about National Sporting Heritage Day. So, you're one of our amazing sporting heritage Ambassadors. And as you know, every year on the 30th of September, we celebrate National Sporting Heritage Day, which is where we put on a spotlight to talk about sporting legacy and celebration across the four nations. And this year we're really encouraging that intergenerational conversation. So, getting younger people to speak to older relatives, families, and friends about their sporting memories and celebrate the collections in their communities. And it kind of strikes me that that's been a really important part of your life. So, I wondered what kind of role did those kinds of discussions in sport have in your life as you were growing up? You know, you've touched on a few things already and did it play a big part of conversation with your family as you were slowly starting to become more involved?

Frances Houghton MBE (19:26):

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, my, amazingly, my family, wasn't very sporty at all and my, the only sporting story, but it always sticks with me in my mind is my, and you know, I was always pressing my parents, you know, it was any, anyone, anyone sporty. And my dad once said, oh, I think your great, great granddad once won the broad jump. And I was like, right, what's the broad jump? Well, you didn't even need to have to run. It was like the long jump, but you just stood there and see how far you leapt from a standing start. I thought great. I've got a lot of sporting heritage in my family. Um, but you know, whether it's your parents or grandparents or it's friends or coaches, you know, just asking what's been before and asking them to paint a picture it's so fascinating and it can teach us so much.

Frances Houghton MBE (20:17):

And not only is that beneficial for us, but I also think it helps keep the memory alive for them and for people to relive the things that they have done and tell that story to the next generation. It keeps it alive. It keeps that memory alive. It keeps those connections alive. It, you know, when we, when we

tell a story or we show a piece of memorabilia, the feeling that we have, you know, it takes us back to a place and more often than not even if it's been, uh, you know, you know, even if I showed something, you know, I didn't have a great race. I'm sure that I would have really, really great feelings associated with it because it's the people we did those things with. And I think that's, what's really, really special. Um, and by telling stories, we can understand so much more about each other, because we will say what we really enjoyed about it, or the funny thing that happened. And that's the, that is the colour. And that's the essence of the, of the memory.

Dr Justine Reilly (21:19):

Oh, thank you. I mean, it's so interesting to hear you say that, because you're trying to find out where the links are in terms of your own history and how that might link to your personal identity and what you're doing with your career. And sometimes I think those links are there, aren't there, but sometimes you are the first person who's doing this, and that must be really fascinating for members of your family now, as well, to talk to you about your experiences.

Frances Houghton MBE (21:45):

I think, I think that my family, do you think, oh, where did this come from? And then, um, it wasn't too long ago, my mum, um, told me the story of how she used to rowed down the Thames in a, like a big fat dingy, you know, really old fashioned wooden thing, and how her father used to come, you know, drop her off at one end and, you know, come back at the end of the day and pick her up at the other end of wherever she'd got to on the river. And I thought, why didn't you tell me this? Because I have now had a career in rowing, but you never told me that you rowed as a youngster, but, um, you know, and that just brings back amazing images of, of what she did and what she enjoyed. Um, and I have a cousin now who, um, is a horse race trainer, and I am fascinated by everything that he does.

Frances Houghton MBE (22:33):

It's a different world, but there's loads of correlations. Um, and yeah, I just find it really, really interesting. And so curious to understand from, you know, coaches and friends, other friends, um, to, you know, to, to hear what, you know, really, because as you say, rowing was a standing start for me to hear the stories from way back when in rowing, I think, Oh, wow. You know, I, I really have this feeling in Rio that we stood on the shoulders of so many other women have gone before us because we were the first women to win an Olympic medal in the women's eight event. But so many women before us had tried and had really moved us forward and we stood on their shoulders. And to know that we were a part of that story was incredible.

Dr Justine Reilly (23:25):

Uh, and, and often those stories aren't told are they, they're not ones that we hear about frequently. And I mean, we were just talking earlier about how it's so important that we do share those stories and that we make people aware that they exist and how instrumental they have been in that development of, of sport. Um, and not just sport, but that, that wider a social change. Um, so yeah, I mean, I'm sold. Um, so I wanted to ask you Frances. So, we talk a lot about sporting heritage, but, you know, you've had such a year, um, on the back of such an amazing career. What about the future? What's next?

Frances Houghton MBE (24:07):

Well, who knows, I mean, I try, I think of rowing as, um, you know, it's a foundation, it's not a goal to be replaced. I don't have another gold medal goal. Um, but it is a foundation I'm gradually adapting to, to not needing to know exactly where I need to be every five minutes and my training plan for every day, um, but I am currently mentoring, uh, athletes going to Tokyo. Those that are aspiring to go to Paris, and that's really rewarding, you know, speaking with them starting conversations so that they can find what works for them. And all of this is a part of their story that hopefully they will then pass on to others as well. And I just really hope to enable others to have a really fulfilling experience in sport. There's a lot of talk you know recently about, you know, sports at the very top end can be, let's just say wearing, or, you know, not as rewarding as, you know, maybe it looks like from the outside and it, but it can be, it can be incredibly rewarding and fulfilling. And I hope to be a part of that, um, in the work that I do with athletes and with governing bodies in ensuring that it is a very fulfilling experience for everyone involved, not just the athletes, but the coaches and the support staff as well.

Dr Justine Reilly (25:22):

Oh, I mean, the amount of contribution you can give to that is amazing and wishing you every success going forward to replicate what you've already done.

Frances Houghton MBE (25:32):

Thank you, Justine. And likewise for the Sporting Heritage Day on the 30th of September, you know, everyone, please get involved, share your memories, you know, talk to older people, talk to younger people share, keep it alive.

Dr Justine Reilly (25:47):

Thank you. And reminders once more, where can people buy your book from? Should they want to,

Frances Houghton MBE (25:52):

Right. So www.franceshoughton.co.uk.

Dr Justine Reilly (25:58):

Thanks Frances. I have enjoyed chatting with you so much today. Um, and can't thank you enough for joining us. Brilliant. Thank you.