

# When it Mattered

## Episode 25: Blake Leeper

Chitra Ragavan: Although he was born without legs from a congenital birth defect, Blake Leeper has never allowed that to prevent him from winning in sports. When Leeper was a teenager, he watched South African sprinter Oscar Pistorius in the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing. It triggered in him a deep desire to run. Leeper began racing in 2010. Since then he has become an eight-time Paralympic track and field international medalist. He holds many world records, including the sixth-fastest runner in the world in the 400-meter dash.

Chitra Ragavan: Hello everyone, I'm Chitra Ragavan and this is When It Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative. I'm joined today by Blake Leeper, who at age 26 has ambitious goals to become one of the fastest runners in the world. But Leeper is struggling to compete in the Paralympics and get accepted into the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. International racing authorities say his running blades give him an unfair height and speed advantage over able-bodied runners. It's a fight he's determined to win.

Chitra Ragavan: Blake, welcome to the podcast.

Blake Leeper: Thank you so much for having me. It is an honor and a pleasure, and just thank you so much for allowing me to share my story and just some of the things I've been through in my life that allow me to be in the situation that I am in today.

Chitra Ragavan: You were born with this extraordinary challenge of being a double amputee, yet you've never let it get in the way. How did you overcome those early years of adversity to start participating both in sports and in life?

Blake Leeper: I really give it to my parents, my family members. I grew up in East Tennessee, and I had an older Brother, and I had Grandparents, and Grandmothers, and Grandfathers, and Aunts, and Uncles, and of course my Mother and my Father. And just their mindset of just saying, "Yes, we have a disabled child, but we want to give him everything that we got. We're going to allow him to live a fulfilled life." I ask my Parents every single time, "What was it like the day

that I was born?" You had doctors rushing out the room. They brought my back and had that conversation, "Mr. and Mrs. Leeper I'm sorry but your baby boy is born missing both of his legs." And I ask my Mom, "Mom, what did you say? Dad, who'd you hit? I know you didn't take that."

Blake Leeper: They give me the same answer over and over and over again. They said, "Blake the day that you was born we was nervous because they rushed you out the room and took you to ICU, but they eventually brought you back, and once they brought you back we didn't see what you was missing, we didn't notice that. We seen the beauty inside of you. And in that moment we decided to do two things, the first thing we're going to do is stick together as a family, as a unit." The second answer was, "We're going to keep a positive attitude towards the whole situation." And that's something that was instilled in me at a early age since day one.

Chitra Ragavan: That's absolutely beautiful, but I'm sure as a young child you had to overcome that huge mental, and emotional and physical block of a. Being different from everybody around you. And, b. Getting accepted into sports and activities. It must have been super difficult. How did you get over that?

Blake Leeper: Absolutely I mean especially in my community I was the only probably disabled child, especially with prosthetic legs and me trying to figure it out, trying to fit in, trying to figure out girlfriends. Trying to figure out life, trying to figure out why I was born without legs. I remember once I was playing tee ball like baseball for when I was like five, or six, seven years old and I wanted to hit a home run. I hit the ball as far as I can and I run to first, and on my way from first to second then like my teammates are cheering. I was really excited because my Dad was my third base coach and I really wanted to make him proud and fit in with the team because they talked about me and I was made fun of sometimes. And, on my way from second to third my leg falls off and the kid comes over and tags me out, and I look over to my teammates and all the excitement's gone and my Dad I could tell he was disappointed, not at me but the situation. As he came over to pick me up I remember being mad at the world, one leg on, one leg off. I leaned over asking, "Why me? Why is this happening to me, I don't get this. My Brother has his legs. My Mom, she has her legs. My Dad has his legs."

Blake Leeper: But, what I realized as I got older and more trial and tribulations that I went through I realized that everything happens for a reason. The reality of it is instead of asking or saying, "Why me?" I started

asking saying, "Well why not me? I'm meant for this." Or, "Why not me? I'm strong enough for this." And just keeping that perception, that perspective that all my trials and tribulations that I'm facing and saying that my adversity is my advantage.

Chitra Ragavan: You started playing all kinds of sports, right?

Blake Leeper: Yes. I played baseball, I played basketball, I ran a little bit of cross country in middle school, but I really fell in love with baseball and basketball as a child but it wasn't until I was in college until I started running track and field.

Chitra Ragavan: Tell me about that moment when you saw Oscar Pistorius, the South African sprinter in the Beijing Paralympics in 2008. He had this futuristic running blades, and I don't know if you're wearing something similar at the time, but what was that like watching him run?

Blake Leeper: Yeah, it was amazing. I can remember I was in my college dorm room on the college diet eating my bowl of Fruit Loops and Oscar Pistorius pops up on ESPN. I was there to watch the basketball highlights. He popped up and it was just highlighting the 2008 Beijing Paralympics Games in the Bird's Nest and he took a gold medal in the 100 meters, 200 meters and the 400 meters. They were saying, "Look how this man born without legs..." I feel like they were talking about me but there were talking about him of course. I was just like shocked, I was amazed. I was like, "Wow, there's something for me." And the crowd of Beijing was 90,000 people and they were cheering. It was just a spark of inspiration that was planted inside of me that even though I never ran track and field a day in my life I just felt and knew like that's what I need to do with my life. That's what it's about. I played sports my whole life, but I was still searching to try and figure out what my passion truly was and why I was really meant to do with my life on this earth.

Blake Leeper: Once I seen that, that was like the inspiration and the passion that was sparked inside of me to pursue this.

Chitra Ragavan: What did you do next? How did you actually start running and what was that like? That first time you tried to do that.

Blake Leeper: Yeah, it was a process of just emailing people and emailing people. These running legs are pretty expensive. Insurance do not cover running blades because they consider it as a luxury and not a necessity, unfortunately. They can range from 10, to 15, \$20,000,

to \$30,000 just for a pair of running legs. I had to reach out to a lot of people to ask for some funding and donations, and of course I heard a lot of nos. I still stayed at it, I still stayed at it, and then I sent a Paralympic friend of mine a email on MySpace and he reached out connected me with a nonprofit out of San Diego, Challenge Athlete Foundation.

Blake Leeper: They sponsored and bought my first pair of legs which was pretty amazing, and I'll never forget when I first got them, a prosthetist who put them together he did his research and he put them together and he gave me this long speech like, "It's going to take almost three to four months to start running on these legs because they're so hi-tech, they're so new, you've never had them before." And I finally get them, we go to the track and I walk the curve for the first time on them. Trying to figure it out, and by the time I was on the straightaway I was sprinting. And, you have to understand being born without legs that's the fastest I ever ran in my life and that was 18 years old. And the way the wind was hitting my face just nothing mattered in that moment. I didn't care that I was disabled. I didn't care that I was missing my legs. I didn't care what I was dealing with the school, or class or life issues. It's just I was free. In that moment I was free and I fell in love with that feeling. I really did.

Chitra Ragavan: And when you look at those blades, it's astonishing what you can do with them, but initially, was it hard to sort of trust those blades? Because they are extremely futuristic and very space-agey and new age. It's just amazing to look at and beautiful. But, must be hard to sort of let go and say, "Okay, I trust these blades."

Blake Leeper: Yeah and actually people don't realize it's a process, as I get used to the blades I get better on the blades of course and maybe I get faster. But, as I get people don't realize its something that's attached to me. I'm not really feeling the ground and so when I'm getting up to 18, 19 miles per an hour, 20 miles per an hour, it's a huge trust factor on this technology, hoping that it would do its job so I won't hurt myself. And, there have been times where I've been at top-end speed in a race and a leg falls off, or there have been times I've been at practice and it's raining and I slip because I don't have the right footing. I think unfortunately that's something that people don't really consider when they kind of look at my situation. That's in the back of my mind at all times when I'm running, that at any moment the technology can fail me and hopefully it won't, but at the end of the day it's not 100 percent guarantee.

Chitra Ragavan: And, did you have to undergo kind of special training and kind of a regimen that helped you cross the chasm from running to winning?

Blake Leeper: Yes, honestly it was... How I try to explain to people and it for me how my life was broken down. When I first got my blades or my running legs and I was kind of in college it was like running was a hobby for me. It was something I did when I went to class, I did it on the side, and I did the best I can. It was fun. Then I moved to San Diego to the Olympic Training Center and then once I moved to the Olympic Training Center in San Diego it became a job for me. With that being job I took it more serious and I was around other Olympians and I learned a lot and I knew I was important, but there was times I was kind of ready to clock out. I really didn't want to be there. There's moments where some people are like, "We don't want to be here at work." You don't want to be at a job but you do your job to get your job done. But, then here recently within these past couple of years I moved to LA. And once I moved to LA I made track and field my life.

Blake Leeper: Once I made it my life, and dedicated, and put everything I could possible put into it Monday through Sunday, not a job that I clock in and clock out. I'm constantly thinking about it, trying to better myself and trying to figure out how I can be the best in the world. Once I made that commitment, that's when I became good to great. That's when I became just an average Paralympic runner to the sixth-fastest man in the world, legs or no legs. That was the decision, the light switch that switch for me.

Chitra Ragavan: Your parents, you talked about how when you were a baby and just born and the doctor broke the news to them, and then they see you running and then winning. Have they ever sort of shared with you what that moment was like and how it's been for them to see that transition?

Blake Leeper: Yeah it's amazing, it's crazy those moments where the doctors came in and told my parents I would never walk. I would never walk and here I am competing at like National Championships and Olympic Games, Paralympic Games in front of thousands, millions of people running. For me, my parents faith is really strong and it's a true testament to God and the faith that they had and that belief saying maybe we was dealt with a tough situation but if you believe and overcome and come together then you can overcome any situation.

Blake Leeper: I'll never forget when I was in London when I won my silver and bronze, it was my Mother, my Father and it was my Grandmother,

my Uncle, and two Aunts and my Grandfather. My Dad's Dad and for him, he was 72 years old and it was the first time he ever flew in his life and his first flight was to London. So, I asked him I was like, "Granddad if I make the..." I call him Papaw, I was like, "Papaw if I make the Paralympic team will you come watch me run?" He's like "Yeah of course I will." He said, "Where's it at?" I was like "It's in London." He's like "Okay, how far is that drive?" I was like, "Papaw, we have to fly." He's like "Okay, we have to fly." He's like, "Do they serve alcohol on the plane?" I was like, "Yeah they do Papaw." So we got Papaw drunk and took him over to London.

Blake Leeper: But, it was amazing because after I won my silver and my bronze I told my family to meet me at a certain part of the stadium, and one of my biggest races was the 200 meter race with like 86,000 people in the stands, 11 million people watching. Oscar was in the race and I took the bronze medal, and I run over there to my family after I get my medal and I hug my Dad, my Mom, my Grandmother and my Aunt. But, I can't find Granddad. Granddad's in a corner and he's crying like a two-year old baby. I mean just crocodile tears just coming down his face. And for me, I'm 21 years old and that's the first time I've ever seen my Grandfather cry. It wasn't tears of sadness, it was tears of joy.

Blake Leeper: Just because, you have to understand it was not only my last name being spoke about, but it was his last name. I could just tell all of that animosity, and worry that he's had having a disabled grandson. Seeing this moment was just a moment of clarity for him saying, "He's going to be okay." And I take that moment and I embed it inside of me because I use that as fuel when I'm training, or when I'm going through tough times, or when I have big goals or ambitions to try to push the limits. And I think, he fought for me when I couldn't fight for myself. He prayed for me when I couldn't pray for myself. He loved me when there was times I couldn't love myself. So, at bare minimum the least that I can do is not give up. Just out of respect for him the least I can do is to keep fighting, keep pursuing my dreams and keep making him proud.

Chitra Ragavan: Did you say Oscar Pistorius was in that race?

Blake Leeper: Yes, he was that was actually the race he lost. The 200 meter race he lost to the Brazilian that year.

Chitra Ragavan: So there were two of you on running blades. That must of been just an incredible sight and story.

Blake Leeper: It was just amazing because Pistorius did run in the Olympic Games that year, and him running the Olympic Games and coming back to the Paralympic Games and just the spotlight, the crowd, and the energy and just how London treated the disabled athletes was just truly amazing. It was once in a lifetime experience.

Chitra Ragavan: It's incredible to watch you even when you are in training. I watched some of your YouTube videos and I saw you on the treadmill running. How fast were you going?

Blake Leeper: On that treadmill run I was able to go up to 25 miles per hour.

Chitra Ragavan: That's stunning.

Blake Leeper: If I was in a school zone, I might get a ticket.

Chitra Ragavan: Give us a quick rundown of your most important medals and records to date.

Blake Leeper: Medals wise, my most important medals would definitely have to be my silver, my bronze in the Paralympic Games. That's just because it's my first one. My family was there, of course Pistorius was in the races. It was just a highlight moment. I was 21, just young and just the experience, and just being there was amazing. Records wise though would definitely have to be within these past two years. And that would be the 400 meter world record that I broke. At first it was Oscar's world record that he had at 45:35 and I broke that in 2017 at the USATF National Outdoor Championships. When I did that I became the first double leg amputee to compete at a able-bodied national championship event. Which I think it was just a true testament that anything is truly possible. And, then I came back this year at the same National Championships just two years later and I broke my world record and ran 44:38 in the 400 meters and qualified for the finals and took fifth overall, and qualified for world championships.

Chitra Ragavan: What was the race where you lost a leg in the final part of the race, and you actually won?

Blake Leeper: That was in 2016. I was running 100 meters and I got out and there's a guy in front of me. I was trying to go get him and we was like getting to the 70, 80, into the 90, and I got to almost 90, 95 and it's like I look down and my leg was gone. And then I had a moment I was like "Uh-oh, this is not going to be good at all." And then I just started falling and I tumbled across the line, just had to tuck and roll. And as I rolled there was another kid on another side, on the

right side. He's missing both of his legs and he's seen me fall and I fell in his lane so he had to jump over me in his blades. My leg is just flying all over the place in the background. It looked like a car crash.

Chitra Ragavan: But, you were okay.

Blake Leeper: Yeah I'm fine, I was fine. It was just a blown tire.

Chitra Ragavan: And did you win?

Blake Leeper: No, I took second that race. Almost though.

Chitra Ragavan: The running blades that you wear, you wear them just for running or do you wear them all the time?

Blake Leeper: Just mostly for running and that's the cool thing with prosthetic and with the industry where it's at today. I have multiple pairs of legs, when I'm sprinting and running, I use my blades. And when I'm driving or walking around throughout the community, I have a pair, even a pair if I'm playing basketball, or doing just different workouts, or CrossFit just whatever the task may be at hand. Whatever it is like with a screwdriver I can switch it out really quick and get the job done. And that's the amazing part about it. What I love about my life is I have so many opportunities and that's my message. Whatever situation that you're in if you're missing a leg or you are disabled whatever, there's so many tools and resources out there if you really go search for it, and really have the ambition and drive. I have a good deep feeling that you can find it and live your life to the fullest, because this wasn't around back in the day and my life would be totally different if I was born 30, 40 years before now.

Chitra Ragavan: Well you're sounding very positive and optimistic, but you've also run into a number of obstacles throughout your career and especially in recent years in competing both in the Paralympics and in getting your name in the hat for the 2020 Summer Olympics coming up in Tokyo. Even though you've actually been competing in a number of races some of those points haven't even been officially entered. So, tell us what are the issues that you're dealing with for both the Paralympics and the Olympics. What's going on?

Blake Leeper: Yeah I got a lot going on. Even though I'm running these times and competing against able-bodied athletes, and I'm breaking Paralympic world records and I claim the title of the Fastest Amputee in the World, unfortunately the Olympic committee, IFF feels like I have an unfair advantage because I use the blades. And



kind of the same battle that Pistorius went through the last time it's just 10 years later and I'm running a second and a half faster. It's kind of unfortunate because I train so hard, and I've dedicated my life to this, and I made so many sacrifices. Overcame so much to be in this position and then finally once I ran the time they say I have a unfair advantage. The unfortunate part with the differences between Pistorius and me, because a lot of people ask, "Pistorius ran why can't you not run? I don't understand." And because the burden of proof has been switched. So, when Pistorius was competing and qualified for the Olympic Games in 2012 the burden of proof was on the Federation. Now they switched it and now me the athlete has to prove my burden. That I do not gain a unfair advantage.

Blake Leeper: Honestly I don't know. I do not know. I have a great legal team that's on it right now, Winston and Strawn they're doing a great job. I asked them, I go to them, "Can I help?" Trying to break down, "What can I do? What do you need me to do?" They give me the same answer over and over again, they say, "Blake, train. Your job is to train and your job is to run fast, and if you do that we'll do our job. Just trust us and we'll trust in you." And then that's what I've been doing. I'm preparing myself to be the fastest man in the world legs or no legs. That's my mind set. I want to really do this. I've took some lumps and bumps and been through adversity and I'm still here standing so I feel like I'm here for a reason, and I'm going to train as hard as I possibly can train so eventually the approval's going to come. I have full confidence that I will get approved, and once that approval comes I want to be mental, spiritually and physically ready to be an Olympic champion.

Chitra Ragavan: And you got the same lawyers that represented Oscar Pistorius.

Blake Leeper: Yes and I have the same lawyers that represented Oscar Pistorius and they won the case for Pistorius. They got him to run in the 2012 Olympic Games so I have confidence. I have full confidence and at the end of day people ask, "Well what happens if you didn't get to run in the Olympics?" Or, "What would happen if it doesn't work out in your favor?" That would be upsetting, I'm not going to say, "I'll be fine." Like I would be upset, but at the end of the day, I was born without legs and the Olympic Committee feels like I have a unfair advantage in running.

Chitra Ragavan: Do you think you do?

Blake Leeper: No. Absolutely not. I really don't. No, and what I'm trying to explain to people like, you know walk a mile in my shoes, I would tell

people, "Walk a mile in my legs." If the people understand the things that I go through as a double leg amputee just to even get to the track. There's days my legs are swollen, my legs are stumps are swollen. They're bleeding, they're sore, they get infections. Sometimes I can't even run. Some days it just doesn't work out for me. And, for me I'm just like if it was that easy, if it was really that easy to run so fast because if you have an unfair advantage it should be easy because that's what the advantage is for. If it was that easy you would see a lot more runners, or athletes, or people cutting their legs off and getting the blades to compete at a high level.

Chitra Ragavan: Is it true, now for the Paralympics you're dealing with a different issue, and that's the height of your blades, right? So, what's going on there?

Blake Leeper: Yes, so I've been running at this height for the past 10 years when I first kind of got into the Paralympic Games, and this is the same height regulation that Pistorius abided by to run in the 2012 Paralympic Games and Olympic Games. So, for me to compete, I've developed years and years and years of testing, and R and D, and muscle strength, and muscle memory to run fast at this height. The Paralympics have now broken up the classes between the single leg and the double leg amputees, and revised the height regulation that changes my height dramatically that's incorrect and they're not backing up their data.

Blake Leeper: So, you know how you have athletes that are 5'4", 5'5" that were normally be 5'11," six foot. You also have athletes who've had their legs and have lost them through a accident and now came back to compete and they're shorter through this new height regulation than they were when they had their legs.

Chitra Ragavan: You're not even competing at Paralympics at the moment?

Blake Leeper: Unfortunately, I am not because it's dangerous for me to make a drastic change like that. I could make a change like that and injure myself and that could put me out for both.

Chitra Ragavan: You're just going to wait and see what happens? Are you challenging that?

Blake Leeper: As of right now my focus is on the Olympic Games. There are some athletes that are trying to shed light to this, not benefiting at all. They're losing their sponsorships. They're losing funding. They're missing out on teams because they're being singled out.

Chitra Ragavan: So in every way the burden is being placed on the athlete?

Blake Leeper: On the athlete, and that's the unfortunate part on both sides. As an athlete my goal is to train to be the fastest person I could be to represent my country, especially as a Paralympian, funding is low as it is already, and now you're asking an athlete to put another burden on them to try and compete and be the best athlete that they can possibly be.

Chitra Ragavan: In terms of funding, endorsements are they completely radically different than what able-bodied athletes are able to get. Do you get endorsements and things?

Blake Leeper: I do, I'm sponsored by Nike, which Nike does a really good job of just helping me out, and we're getting there with other brands and companies. It's not there yet. Now it's the US Paralympic Committee, and now that Paralympians now get the same medal money bonuses as Olympians, which is a huge change, and the fact that they made that change is amazing. But, now sponsors in return, it would be amazing to step up and support just as much with the Paralympic movement and the Paralympic athletes and see that they have really amazing stories to tell, and really amazing testaments of overcoming adversity in these Paralympic athletes that rose and now are on this world stage competing at the highest level. That's just amazing to see and you get inspired by seeing that, so we're not there yet but I can see the trend moving in that direction.

Chitra Ragavan: I think it's fair to say that these companies like Nike have a very long way to go. You've seen a lot of the coverage in the press of how pregnant female athletes are being treated, those kinds of things. It's good that you've had a positive experience.

Blake Leeper: Yeah, and that's the great thing. It's unfortunate how certain issues do play out, but me with my personal experience, especially with the disabled community like I said, I can tell it's going in the right directing. And at the end of the day, as long as we're having a conversation and saying, "Hey, it's not there yet, but we're trying to do better, and we will do better." That's all you can ask a community or company to do.

Chitra Ragavan: You know some of your fellow runners say that they're really proud to be competing against you, and to be in the race with you, but there are others that are not so happy. Overall, what's been the sentiment and how have you been treated by your peers.

Blake Leeper: Yeah, overall the people I keep around me of course support me. I've noticed some of the top runners in the world, in the nation have nothing but love and support towards my case and my situation. But, I have heard the chatter. People have come up to me and said, "People have been talking." Behind my back. I try to do my best to try and stay focused but of course you see the Tweets and you see the comments. At the end of the day that's their opinion and my goal is I would love for the people to look past the blades and look at the man, and look at my life, and look at my story, and look at the things that I'm trying to do. I'm not trying to hurt nobody, I'm not trying to take nothing away from nobody. I'm not trying to cheat nobody out of nothing. I'm just trying to inspire people and I'm trying give people hope and just say, "Look my situation at beginning may sound terrible, and I might have been wrote off from day one being born without legs but with the right support system, and the right belief system and the right attitude, I was able to become Olympic champion."

Blake Leeper: That's my message. That's my story. That's what I want to do. I don't want to make people mad, I don't want to piss people off, I want to inspire and make people happy. If they feel some type of way like I don't belong there then that's on them because at the end of the day we're going to break these barriers. There's been laws passed for disabled individuals but the reality of it is they still get treated less than. They still get looked at. They still get laughed at and they still get pointed at. The reality of it is. The time is now for the change. We need to change that.

Chitra Ragavan: Oscar Pistorius in many ways was your early hero or at least your impetus for being where you are today, but in someways he's a fallen hero. He's serving jail time for being in prison, convicted of murdering his girlfriend. When you see his potential and his promise and the role model that he was in his early years for the disabled community of athletes, how do you feel about his fall from grace?

Blake Leeper: At the end of the day I've watched his story closely and the times he's taken gold and I've taken silver, and times he's taken silver and I've taken bronze. The situation is so sad, the life that was lost with Reeva and Oscar's in jail, the families that's affected by a decision. The takeaway for me was, I've watched him from the time he was running Paralympics all the way up years and years and years, leading up to the Olympics and then he finally got to the Olympic games and then it was probably less than six months after the Olympics when the situation happened. It was just shocking to me how by one decision how your life can change. By one decision,

how many lives can be changed or be lost by one decision? It's just sad. I pray constantly for both sides of the parties but it's just a constant reminder to me to try and stay focused as much as possible. To finish the mission.

Chitra Ragavan: Now you also had some struggles in 2015. You were banned for almost two years from competing because there was a test I guess that proved positive for cocaine. What happened?

Blake Leeper: Yes, the what happened was my life. I was in a dark place. I was coming off the 2012 Paralympics Games going into 2013, 2014 and I planned for the 2012 Paralympics games but my issue was I did not plan after, right? I was so caught up with just getting there and making everybody proud and getting the mission done that I didn't have nothing planned right after, and I was searching and I was trying to find my happiness. They call it the Olympic Depression but I was just in this deep dark hole. I wasn't happy with track anymore and remember running used to make me happy, and I lost the love for it and I caught myself partying and hanging around the wrong people, until I got caught. A week before I went partying and then I flew out to Nationals and broke my American record and tested positive for cocaine from partying the week before. You're talking about rock bottom. I lost sponsorship, I lost my legs because one of my sponsorships was my leg sponsorship and they was providing me with my legs and I had a pair of legs coming on my way to help because the ones was breaking down and the canceled that order.

Chitra Ragavan: Oh no.

Blake Leeper: And took my legs away. Yeah took my legs away from me. I had to go to my closet and grab Duct Tape and just Duct Tape old legs together and honestly that was a fall from grace for me. I was a hometown hero. A Lot of people and kids looked up to me in the community, especially in the disabled community and breaking news in Kingsport Tennessee, Black Leeper hometown hero, tested positive for cocaine. I lost the will to run. I lost my ability to compete, the one thing that I loved I couldn't do anymore. And I had a hard conversation with myself, asking myself, "Everything you've spoken through your life, everything you've been through, what are you going to do now?" I tell people every single time, "What I went through, being born without legs and overcoming that adversity. Those same characteristics, I used those characteristics to beat being suspended, to beat that addiction, to rise above this deep, dark hole of depression that I was in after I was suspended." Staying persistent, never giving up, showing up every single day.

Blake Leeper: And once I made that commitment, I moved to LA. That's when I moved to LA. And once I made that commitment, I found new teammates, I found new trainers, I found new partners and my whole life changed to where in 2017 I came back and I broke Oscar's world record, then I broke my world record the next two years.

Chitra Ragavan: When that happened, the cocaine thing, did you tell your Parents and your Grandpa that it was coming? Or did they find out on the news?

Blake Leeper: No, I told them. One of the hardest thing to tell was my Grandmother, because my Grandmother was so excited in London. I'll never forget the 400 meters, Oscar took gold and I took silver and we're doing our victory laps with our flags. My Grandmother and my Grandfather got front row tickets. I gave them the front row tickets for the 400-meter seats because that was two tickets I get and I put my Mom and Dad up but let them be seated front row. And Oscar's in front of me taking his victory lap couple of meters up and my Grandmother stops him and says, "Oscar, Oscar, Oscar." And he stops and looks at her. She's like, "I'm Blake Leeper's Grandmother, and he's going to beat you next time."

Blake Leeper: And she says that to him in his victory lap, and so she goes back home and she's so excited about this trip, and she's showing her friends all the pictures, and how amazing it was, and she's like, "I'm getting ready for Rio, I'm going to get ready for Rio. I'm so excited, I'm going to get my shots, I'm getting ready." And in 2015 of course I tested positive and I lost my ability to go to Rio. I couldn't go. And that next year in 2016, my grandmother passed away due to cancer. And I promised her that I would go. She would ask me like "We going to go to Rio?" And I told her over "Yeah, of course we're going to go." And then the funeral I had to look at her and try to make that amends of the mistake that I made. I went over it, was it worth it? The question I kept asking myself, "Was it worth it? Was it worth it? Was it worth it?" And every answer I said, "No, it wasn't. It wasn't." And I have to feel that, right? That I couldn't fulfill my promise to my grandmother because I wanted to go have fun, or I couldn't stay focused. So, I promised myself I would never ever be in that situation again. I'm never ever going to feel that feeling ever again.

Blake Leeper: Because that feeling of letting someone like that in my life down is tough. But, I'm going to use that and I needed that to make this change in my life to be the best human being, to be the best man that I can possibly be.

Chitra Ragavan: And you talked a little bit about that when you recently took part in that Netflix show, *Awake*, in which contestants are being made to stay awake for 24 hours and you're counting coins, and then you're doing all these silly and challenging tests, but then you have to guess the number of coins you've counted and if you get close to the actual amount then you get to take the money home, and you won...

Blake Leeper: Yes.

Chitra Ragavan: \$191,000

Blake Leeper: Yes, I did. Which is crazy, and I tell people, you know the crazy thing about it a lot of people don't even know? I wasn't even supposed to be on that show. I was supposed to be competing in Brazil at a track meet that I was already signed up and my track agent was supposed to get me in. Even though I auditioned for the show and made it through all the rounds in my head I was like, "I'm going to go to Brazil, but I'll go through the rounds just in case." And right before I was supposed to go to Brazil I got a letter from the IAAF saying I have an unfair advantage that shut my season down. And once that shut my season down, it opened up my schedule to participate on the show that I didn't even know I was going to win that much. Had no clue there was even that much money on the line and I walked away winning \$191,000.

Chitra Ragavan: And what did you say to the host of the show when she asked you your motivations for doing it?

Blake Leeper: It was just having confidence. It was amazing thing. Once again I was the only disabled person there on the show and I was there battling and fighting and using my tools that I've learned being born without legs and applying that to this show to win money. And I was trying to show people that even though you have a disability, even though you're facing hard challenges, you can still show up and fight. You can still show up and have confidence. You still can show up and win the big bank, win the big money. I'm pretty sure lined up odds was probably against me. The guy missing both his legs probably is not going to do so good. And I ended up beating everybody. That's my message right there. If you show up and fight, miracles happen.

Chitra Ragavan: And it was kind of funny in your first test where you had to remove the batteries out of those clattering monkeys and you said, "Hey, you know I'm really good with a screwdriver because I use it every day for my prosthetics." And you won that. You won that challenge.

Blake Leeper: Right and I won that challenge. I'm telling you it was like fate because you've been up for 24 hours. Your mind is all over the place. Your hands are shaking. Your hand eye coordination is off. I just go back, "Okay Blake, if you're putting your leg together what do you do?" And then lefty-loosey, and if I was in a rush in a basketball game, or in a track meet and my leg was coming loose how would you do it? Find the rhythm. And I just go to the bare basics of how I live my life and applied that to the game and it worked out for me.

Chitra Ragavan: And you were also smart enough to walk away from the option to wager that \$190,000 against the big million dollar game price. You were funny you said, "My Mama didn't raise me stupid, I'm going to take this money." So, overall except for that little cocaine thing, you've shown both extreme competitiveness and extreme good judgment, right?

Blake Leeper: Yeah I know, other than that little hiccup in my life I felt like I have and honestly with that hiccup I don't want to say the best thing that's ever happened to me, but it was a beautiful thing that I had to rise and grow from. And the lesson that I learned... One of my favorite quotes is like a Rocky quote, "Life is not how hard you can hit, it's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward." It's about how hard you can take hits and keep pushing through the adversity and I was hit pretty hard with life and I was able to push through and show life, and show God that I'm not going to give up. I feel like the Netflix was just the universe rewarding me of just saying, "You didn't give up in that moment, and even though things are not going the way you want it right now, this is just a testimony and a testament to let you know to keep pushing through, and as long as you keep fighting, doors are going to keep falling down, and miracles are going to keep happening."

Chitra Ragavan: What did you do with the money?

Blake Leeper: Saved it. I actually put it up, I bought a car and I'm going to get an apartment but honestly it's going to go to training. I'm putting it up. My goal and my focus is going into the Olympic Games and I know it's not going to be cheap, and I know it's not going to be easy and I will not stop until I'm there. I'm putting that money up and I'm reinvesting it into myself to be the fastest man in the world. That's exactly what I'm doing with it. I'm setting my life to produce the best product I possibly can produce next year in 2020 at the Olympic Games.



Chitra Ragavan: Blake it's been such a pleasure talking to you. Thank you for being on the podcast.

Blake Leeper: Thank you so much for having me. And again, thank you for allowing me to share my story and allow me to tell my side of it.

Chitra Ragavan: Blake Leeper was born without legs but blessed with a fearless and competitive spirit. He's an eight-time Paralympic track and field international medalist. He holds a number of world records including becoming the sixth fastest runner in the world in the 400-meter dash. He's now fighting to be excepted into the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo.

Chitra Ragavan: Thank you for listening to When it Mattered. Don't forget to subscribe on Apple Podcast or your preferred podcast platform. And if you like the show please rate it five stars, leave your review, and do recommend it to your friends, family and colleges. When it Mattered is a weekly leadership podcast produced by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative. For questions, comments, and transcripts, please visit our website at [goodstory.io](http://goodstory.io) or send us an email at [podcast@goodstory.io](mailto:podcast@goodstory.io). Our producer is Jeremy Corr, Founder and CEO of Executive Podcasting Solutions. Our theme song is composed by Jack Yagerline. Join us next week for another edition of When it Mattered. I'll see you then.