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It seems we have been measured almost all of our lives, when we are infants, with our height and our weight, and as we grew it became our speed and our strength. And even in school there are test scores and today with our salaries and job performance. It seems as if those personal averages are almost always used to measure where we are in comparison to our peers. And I think we should look at that a little differently. That personal average is just that, it's something very personal and it's for you, and I think if you focus on that and work to build that, you can really start to accomplish some really amazing things.

00:45

This idea started for me on a December evening in 2011. I had just stepped outside to do our evening chores to feed our horses. I hopped into our tractor, and a few minutes later, a five foot tall, 700-pound bale of hay fell from the loader, crushing me in the seat of the tractor and in the process shattering my T5 and T6 vertebrae. I didn't lose consciousness, but I felt this buzz throughout my body, and I knew what had happened right away. My hands were reaching for my legs, but my legs didn't recognize anything touching them. And in fact, I couldn't feel anything from the center of my chest down.

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So there I was, about 100 feet from the house, with my arms wrapped around the steering the wheel, trying to hold myself up, waiting for help. And unlike what you see in TV and the movies, as much as I tried to get the dogs to go to the house and get help --

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(Laughter)

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they just stared at me. Well, 45 minutes later, my wife came home, and I heard her step out of the house and, like, normal, if I needed help, "Hey, do you need help?" And I said, "Yes." And there was a brief pause and then I heard her yell, "Do you need 9/11 help?" And again I yelled, "Yes." Well, not long after I was enjoying my very first helicopter ride all the way to the hospital.

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Now, the injury wasn't very dramatic or graphic. I simply broke a bone or two. And in the process, I was told I'd probably never walk again. It became very normal for me to use a rope to sit up in bed, because my abdominal muscles no longer work. Or to use a board to slide out of bed into a wheelchair, or to even wait for people to reach things for me. Everything that I had learned and had known about my height and my strength and my balance and my mobility was blown away. My entire personal average had been reset.

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Now you could be sure in those days I was being measured more than ever, by the doctors and nurses for sure but maybe more so in my own mind, and I found myself comparing what I thought I was going to be able to do going forward with what I once was able to do. And I became pretty frustrated. It took some very consistent prodding from my wife, who kept saying, "Get your eyes up," before I could get moving forward. And I soon realized that I almost had to forget about the person I was before and the things I was able to do before. I almost had to pretend it was never me. And I'm afraid if I had not made that realization, my frustration would have turned into something much harder to recover from.

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Now, luckily, a few weeks later, I was transferred to a specialty spinal cord rehab hospital about 10 hours from home, and wouldn't you know, the first day of rehab and the first session we had something called fit class, and a group of us broke into teams to see which team could do the most reps in the weight machine. Now, we've all been there, haven't been to the gym in a year or two. Neither had I. And so what do you do? You try to do what you did a couple of years ago, and you do a couple of sets. And then what do you do? A couple more. And you're feeling even better, so you do more. And the next two weeks you complain to your family about how sore you are.

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(Laughter)

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Well, my team went all out and we won, we won big, and for the next three days I could not straighten my arms, which isn't that big a deal except when you're in a wheelchair and that's really what you have to use to get around. And that proved to be a very important lesson for me. It was one thing that I couldn't compare myself to myself, but even around people in the same

situation in that hospital, I found that I couldn't try to keep pace or set pace with them as well, and I was left with really only one choice and that was to focus on who I was at that point in time with where I needed to go and to get back to who I needed to be.

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For the next six weeks, for seven to eight hours a day, that's what I did. I built little by little, and, as you might expect, when you're recovering from a spinal cord injury, you're going to have a bad day. You might have a few in a row. What I found out is that good and bad really didn't have a lot of meaning unless I had the context of knowing what my average was. It was really up to me to decide if something was bad or good based on where I was at that point in time, and it was in my control to determine if it really was a bad day. In fact, it was my decision on whether or not I could stop a streak of bad days. And what I found during that time away from home is I never had a bad day, even with everything going on. There were parts of my day that were certainly not as pleasant as they could be, but it was never an entirely bad day.

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So I'm guessing that all of you have been through a meeting that probably didn't go very well, or a commute that wasn't as great as you would like it, or even burned dinner at night. Did those things really ruin your entire day? What I found in those scenarios is the quicker you move on to what's next, the quicker you can start attacking things. And by moving on to next as fast as possible, you shrink the time you spend in those bad scenarios and it gives more time for the good. And, as a result, the good outweighs the bad, your average increases and that's just how the math works. It didn't matter to me if I'd spent the morning really struggling with my medication, or at lunch my legs being very spastic, or even if I had fallen out of my wheelchair. Ask my wife. It happens quite often. She's here. They were just small parts of my day and small parts of my average.

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And so, in the months and years that followed, I continued to try to attack things in that way, and before I knew it I was being presented with some pretty incredible challenges, like completing a marathon in a wheelchair.

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In early 2016, I met my physical therapist, and after a few really grueling sessions, she must have sensed something, because she pulled me aside and said, "You know, you should do a half marathon. In your wheelchair. And, oh yeah, it's in 10 weeks." And I thought in my mind, "You're crazy." I didn't have a workout plan. I didn't have any way of knowing how fast I needed

to go or how far I was supposed to go. But I simply got to work, and I started tracking every workout, every day, and I simply wanted to be as good as or as fast as I was the prior day. And in the end I really created that average for myself and I tried to build on that as much as I could. Well, I finished that race right in time with what my average should have been, and somewhere along the way I kind of closed the door on who I once was. That person who I was before and all those things I thought I was able to do really didn't matter. In fact, walking again really didn't matter. It became much less of a goal for me in terms of where I was going to go. And besides, like, you guys are so slow when you walk. In crowds like this, it is so difficult. I'm like, "Get out of the way. We're going places."

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(Laughter)

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And all I wanted to do was go fast. And so I did what I thought I should do. I started researching wheelchair racing. And I went online and I found the best of the best, I learned their technique, I learned about the equipment, and I was lucky to have a coach that offered me a way to get started. And after talking with him and having him help me get those things underway, as I was leaving, he says, "You know, you should do the 2017 Chicago Marathon." And he's the coach, I can't tell him no.

08:00

So with that guidance, I went back home, and I got to work, much like in the prior way. And I continued researching, but I had learned my lesson. I was really careful not to compare with how accomplished those people on the internet were and how fast they were, because if I had, I probably never would have continued going through with it.

08:19

Well, the weekend of the race arrived, and it was just like going to college for the first time. You're dumped off, there's a whole bunch of people around you, you don't really know very many of them, somebody's got the cool stereo and the cool TV and they're smart and they're pretty and they're cute and they're handsome and you don't know if you really belong. But then somebody says, "Hey, let's go get food." And all of a sudden, that friend group happens and you start to settle in. Well, that weekend of the race, we had a meeting called the Wheelers Meeting, and there were 60 wheelchairs in that room the night before the race. And wouldn't you know it, all of the people that I had been researching were there, the best in the world. There must have been over 50 Paralympic medals in the room that day. And I felt pretty small and I fell back into

that trap of comparing myself. I knew that my averages that I had been tracking during my workouts were over 90 seconds slower per mile than theirs. And the coach was the only one there that I knew, and he reached out and noticed something, and I think he sensed my anxiety, and he invited me to get food with his team. And with that, everything settled down. I realized really quick that they didn't care about my average, surely, and I had forgotten about theirs.

09:36

Well that next day, I finished the race about 45 minutes after the person that won it. But as I was leaving, those new friends, who are very close today, challenged me to stay involved and to keep working through different races and competitions. And so I did what I knew how. I went home, and I got busy.

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Now, as you can imagine, being in a wheelchair, let alone training for a marathon in a wheelchair, is a pretty lonely thing. I have an incredible group of friends that will ride bikes with me and keep track of pace and help me out. But in the end, it's still five to six days a week, it's 50 to 60 miles of effort, and it's a lot of alone time. And for the most part, you really have nothing to rely on but yourself in those times. It's my average, and I'm trying to get better little by little.

10:22

Well, this fall I was in Chicago for the third time. It was my seventh marathon, and just like going back to college for your junior year, you're anticipating catching up with friends and getting excited about rolling right back into things. Well, I attended the same pre-race meeting and the same pre-race meal and caught up with those friends. And we lined up for the race, and right at the start, my average kicked in, and before long I caught up with some of those friends and was able to keep pace with them and push together. But it wasn't long before I faded. It just happened, and I found myself all alone again with really nothing to rely on other than what I had worked so hard to be at. But we turned into the wind at the halfway point, and my average became a strong advantage, and it wasn't long before I caught some of those friends and passed them all the way to the finish. And while I didn't set a personal record that day, I did finish 30 seconds per mile faster than my prior Chicago times and just left myself pretty excited.

11:22

And so this is me. This is my average. Seventy-five days from today, I'll be in Boston for my second time. I'm super excited about that. But keep in mind, this isn't really just about racing. I'm working really hard every day to be better in so many other ways, a better parent, a better husband, a better coach, teammate, friend, person. And I promise you, even though what you see

here is very visible in terms of the challenges that I face, everybody here has something that they're fighting, and it may be visible, it may not be, but please, take some time and focus on you instead of others, and I bet you can win those challenges and really start accomplishing so many great things.

12:05

Thank you.

12:07

(Applause)