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Bex Gentry: Welcome to Set the Pace, the official podcast of New York Roadrunners presented by Peloton. I'm your host Peloton instructor, Bex Gentry, and I'm so happy to be here with you. Wow, my wonderful co-host and CEO of New York Roadrunners Robson Mouquet is traveling for work, so that leaves me to bring you all of the news of the weekend and kind of selfishly, I'm going to start with a little bit of fantastic news and a really special weekend that I personally had over in Los Angeles. I was honored to be able to celebrate the actress Jennifer Garner completing 67 days of movement. Jen decided after her birthday earlier this year in April that she wanted to move and do something for Save the Children to raise awareness of her work as an ambassador for the nonprofit. \$67 is all it takes to help save a child from the brink of nutrition.

She took the number 67 and decided 67 days nonstop every single day, she was going to move a minimum of a mile in some way and she did it. I jumped on board with her as a lot of you probably know if you follow me on Instagram or on Peloton, and it was incredible. We decided to hold a finale on Sunday in Los Angeles. We had over 200 people show up to a secret location and we ran a mile together and hopefully, helped elevate to the voice of Save the Children and the work that still needs to be done in order to help save as many children as possible from the brink of starvation. Thank you to anybody who showed up in person, to anybody who ran with us virtually, and to everybody who is able to donate. If you feel like finding out more, please let me know.

You can start your own. It doesn't end there. I actually finished mine on Tuesday of this week and there we are. You can do yours. You can do yours if you want to move for 67 days. All right, so coming up, talking of wonderful things, this coming weekend, New York Roadrunners has not one but two storied races on deck. On Saturday, June 28th, it is the 44th annual Front Runners New York LGBT Pride run and are, you can do yours I of I actually this week and move on Saturday. Look out for a very tall, very handsome Italian, that's all I'll say. On Sunday June 29th, it is the 23rd

annual Achilles Hope and Possibility of Four Miles presented by TD Bank. Another wonderful race and I can't wait for you all to get out and move. It is looking like it's actually going to be cooler this weekend as well, so perfect, but right now it is a really, really hot week here in New York City. Temperatures are expected to be in the nineties plus until the weekend where it will drop to the low eighties.

If you are finishing off training for these races or any others ahead, this is just a coach's reminder to train carefully, stay hydrated, utilize those inside machines, aka treadmills, and really do, if you are having to run outside, run as early as possible, run in the most shaded route you can find, and if you need to, please don't be too proud to cut your workout short. It's better to get a good short workout in, then overdo it on a really long one. All right, so with all of that, I wish you a wonderful running weekend.

Okay, coming up on today's show, one of my favorite athletes and a past guest of ours, Nikki Hiltz, returns to set the pace almost exactly a year from their previous episode. Oh my goodness, what a year it has been. I cannot wait to talk to them about the Olympics Grand Slam track and all of the awesome changes that 2024 brought for them.

For today's member moment, Meb will be here with New York Roadrunners member Mauricio Balandino, and then back to Meb for today's Meb Minutes. All about recovery rituals. Ooh, that sounds good, Meb. All right, stay tuned.

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Today, we get to catch up with Olympian, Nikki Hiltz, a title we couldn't actually use a last time Nikki joined us on the show. What a year it has been for them. Right after we spoke to Nikki, they earned their spot at the 2024 Paris Olympics where they went on to make history by reaching the 1,500 meter final. Since then, Nikki has continued to set new records on the track and taken on the unique challenge of competing in the high profile Grand Slam track series, which ended with a surprise twist. Nikki's season has been packed with personal milestones, headline making races, and plenty of lessons from the front lines of professional running and here they are. Hi, how are you?

00:06:05

Nikki Hiltz: I'm so good, how are you?

00:06:07

Bex Gentry: I am great, even the better for having you here today. It is such an honor. I was listening back to our last conversation with Rob, obviously, almost exactly a year ago. You were days away from Eugene ...

00:06:23

Nikki Hiltz: Crazy.

00:06:23

Bex Gentry: ... and you could feel the excitement, nerves, passion in your voice, and then the next thing I kind of remember was being in Paris watching you run and just being like, "Oh wow, this is so freaking cool." I want to jump straight in with you and you are probably never going to be sick of talking about the Olympics, so hopefully that's okay.

00:06:50

Nikki Hiltz: Of course. No, I love it. Yeah, yesterday was, I don't know, National Olympic Day or whatever and I was going through my camera roll and brought me back, so yeah, no, I'm definitely never not happy to talk about that time.

00:07:03

Bex Gentry: Brilliant. Okay, so let's go back to crossing the line at the Olympic trials because I feel like that's where we left off with you. Crossing the line at the US Olympic trials, not just crossing the line, breaking the meet record. Can you take us inside your mind during those final 100 meters and what made it, if it did, I'm sure it did feel different to any of your races you'd had before?

00:07:30

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, I mean, it's such a funny thing because you're trying to approach it. I felt like that whole week leading up, I was trying to just tell myself, "It's just like any other race. It's not that deep, just do your best." Then there's just all this elevated branding everywhere and we're also the very last race of the trials essentially. You're just seeing people become Olympian after Olympian. There's all this hype being built, but you're trying to be like, "Nope, just focus on do what you always do, try to get a good position, kick hard," all this stuff. I just remember that last 200 meters. It was kind of the first time I allowed myself to, "No, this is the Olympic trials. This is the Olympics. A top three finish means you're going

to Paris," but I think I did a good job of not really allowing myself to go there until the last hundred, and I think that's why you saw that really explosive kick, 'cause I was like, "Oh, let's go."

It was one of those things where I was with 200 to go, I was in fourth place. There was three New Balance athletes in front of me and three teammates in front of me. It was like Ellie, Heather, and Emily, and I was like, I remember thinking, "Wow, that'd be crazy if they swept." I was like, "No, get back in the race." Then with, yeah, I think with a hundred to go, I was in third, so I was on the team with a hundred to go and then it was just like, "No, I want to win. I want to see if I have enough." Because the year before I had won the national championships and I wanted to defend my title. Then yeah, crossing the finish line, I think one of the biggest emotions was just relief.

I think that's kind of sad that that's one of the first feelings because that emotion relief means like there was a lot of stress or something built up and then it's a let go. At the same time, that's kind of the reality of the trials. It's so stressful and it's so do or die. Then there was so much joy. It was like we did it and there was Emily and Ellie with me and we were like, "We're Olympians," and then I hugged Emma and I hugged, I had a camera crew there. There was a documentary following me. It was just so much love and support and the people who were on the journey with me. Yeah, it was just one of the best moments of my life for sure.

00:09:42

Bex Gentry: Oh my gosh, I can't even, I mean, I can slightly relate. I have run an Olympic trials but not on the track and is very ... I mean, I had a very similar mentality to you of it's not that deep, it's just a marathon, just get it done. Then at the end you're like, "No, but it means everything to me."

00:10:04

Nikki Hiltz: No, it's so real.

00:10:05

Bex Gentry: It's so real. Oh my goodness. Okay, so you've come over the finish line, you've broken the record, you have made your spot, your coveted spot on the team and realized that it was a different race. It was a very different race to anything you've done before. As you were in that moment, I remember when we spoke last time, you said you were leaning into training rather than racing into shape. Did that element of your mentality and training come through for you in whether it was in that moment, at the end of

the trials or in the weeks leading up to Paris? How did that change? Because it's very different to being training for the trials to then being like, okay, well now I have to be ready to race in the Olympics, like what?

00:10:56

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, no, that's a good question. I mean, I think last year when we were looking at the trials and looking to, okay, you have to beat all these people in order to make the team, it was one of those things where I'm like, okay, I'm probably going to have to be in sub four shape and maybe indecently sub four shape. I think we prioritize, like I know how to race and my racing tactics are so sharp, and I've done this for so long that I don't need to race sharp and I need to get strong because we know Ellie St. Pierre is going to take it out. It is just kind of like that was our tactic. I'm actually really happy that I trained for so long because I got so fit. I was able to run 3:55, which at the time I think was a three or four second PR.

Then it was like I had done this such huge training block that by the time the trials happened, I was so excited to race. I love racing and that's why I do this, and the training, it kind of is mundane and boring. I've learned within the past few years to actually really love the training side too, but that doesn't come naturally for me. The grind is like, it's hard. Then it was once the trials were over, I went, I was like, "Okay, I want to keep racing until," and so I did a race in LA and then the Olympics are, there are three rounds. Yeah, I think I was just excited to race. I actually got very sick after the trials. I got COVID, which I think every single person in Eugene did. It was pretty bad, but it was one of those things that I had a down week anyways, it was so much hype. It was fine, but I do think that kind of offset my training a bit leading into the Olympics, just it was kind of a quick turnaround from the trials to Paris.

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Bex Gentry: So close.

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Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, but I got back and I went to St. Moritz like 10 days leading into Paris, and yeah, I think I was ready. I was so ready to keep racing because that's the fun part. The rounds in same thing. It was like we knew the rounds were going to be fast. You just know how the 15s run on the global stage on the women's side. I mean, I guess sometimes the men's too, but it's just fast. We know exactly how that finals is going to go, so you can actually really

prepare for it in training. Yeah, I don't really know if that answered your question. I just kind of rambled about training for a while.

00:13:11

Bex Gentry: No, and it just kind of shows that after the Olympics, I've never heard somebody have COVID at the best time. That could have happened in those few weeks between the trials and your Olympic races, but you just sort of stayed in the zone, I guess, of doing what you like to do, which is show up, race and just be in it for you and put your fitness to the test, which is so cool. So, so cool. Okay. Talking of coldness and change and just the message that you, and I think I said this to you last time, the message that you bring to the world of sport is so unique, and I kind of hate that it's unique, but there needs to be one unique person for things to become much more known. I think for you at Paris Olympics, you became the first openly transgender and non-binary American to reach an individual Olympic trial. What does that mean to you as Nikki?

00:14:17

Nikki Hiltz: It's crazy. I think it's just one of those things where it's just who I am. I can't really separate it from my identity 'cause it is my identity, and then I'm also an Olympian, which is also such a unique, Olympic finalist that's also such a unique identity. I think it's really special when people say that because it's like, yeah, it's the two things I'm really proud of coming together. I'm an Olympic finalist. I'm also non-binary, and I'm so proud to be queer and a part of the transgender community and underneath that umbrella of what it means to be transgender. Yeah, it's really special, and it's definitely something I don't take lightly. I want to be a good, I don't know, role model, representation of my community. I try to be kind and be gracious and be just me and hope that that can help normalize, oh wow, trans people aren't these big, crazy scary things that a lot of people are trying to make them out to be. Yeah, it definitely means a lot and I'm very proud of that accomplishment.

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Bex Gentry: So you should be, and in last year's interview you said, I know I'm not the first, I know I'm the first, but I'm not the last. I'm interested, you've done so much advocacy work, you've done so many events and you've had so much exposure since the Olympics. Have you met or heard from other young athletes or just other humans who have felt seen and been able to rise up because of your journey?

00:15:49

Nikki Hiltz: Oh, totally. Yeah. I mean, I meet a lot of queer kids and specifically at track meets, which I think is awesome. I don't know what sport is the most welcoming, but I think just it's really cool about track. They feel safe at a track meet and they can come and say hi and say, "Hi, my name's so-and-so, I'm also non-binary," and it just fills my heart with so much joy. It makes me feel less alone. Then I always give them a hug, like, yeah, I don't know, but yeah, I think it's really cool. I think representation or I don't know, motivation, it's kind of a two-way street. I think when people say they're non-binary, they're just saying it to let me know, but it really motivates me. I'm like, or they say, "You're an inspiration." I'm like, "No, you telling me, that really motivates me and wants me to keep showing up because now I can put a face and a name to someone who know I'm showing up for that person who I just met."

Yeah, I love connecting with my community and yeah, no, it's definitely, like you said, since the Olympics has become a lot more and a little overwhelming, but I always try to make time for people and sign as many autographs, to take as many photos. Yeah, I mean, I have time, why not? It's fun. The people I meet, I say this all the time, but my followers are genuinely the coolest people in the world. I'll meet someone who's like, "Ph, I'm doing, I'm working for NASA, being a rocket scientist, and I follow you." I was like, "What? You're way cooler than me." I think I would genuinely be friends with a lot of them, so yeah, I love meeting people and the people I've met have been great.

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Bex Gentry: That's amazing. You said that it's sometimes overwhelming though. How do you handle the emotional weight of representing so many people?

00:17:44

Nikki Hiltz: Such a good question. I mean, I think to be good at this sport, you have to do all the physical stuff. You have to run the mileage, do the workouts, do the weight sessions, sit in the sauna, all the little things. Then you also have to do that on the mental side too. I feel like since 2023 really prioritize that. I journal a lot. I meditate every single day. I have some crazy meditation streak that I am I can't break, which I know that's not the point of meditation.

00:18:15

Bex Gentry: Hey, if it works for you, it works for you/

00:18:18

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, I'm definitely a perfectionist, but I don't know. I try to do all the little things on the mental side too. I think that it helps with my running and performance when I'm at the trials and it's like, okay, top three, make the team. It can help me stay very present and assure myself even if that doesn't happen. Then I think that also has really helped with when it comes to being an advocate in this space and time right now, it's really centering myself. Emma, my partner, is my best friend and biggest advocate and always reminds me, "Hey, your role is just to humanize this thing. You don't have to do any more or less than that. You just have to show up as yourself and that's going to be enough." Things like that, conversations like that, I can't tell you how many conversations I'm going to have about this stuff every single day. It's just very reassuring and yeah, I guess, that's how I navigate it. It's just with my people and then with prioritizing my mental health and then just being really sure of myself. There's not a single thing anyone can say that I haven't already heard, and I'm like, "Well, that's not true because I know myself and that's not real." Yeah, whatever it is, you know what I mean?

00:19:30

Bex Gentry: Yeah. That's a really good message as well, to have somebody outside of you, it's really easy to G yourself up in your own head, but there are days when even things you've heard a hundred times can get to you. To have somebody who has your back right there by your side to say, "Hey, listen, all you've got to do is show up as you," is so beautiful and such an amazing reminder that you just have to be you. That is the greatest gift that you can give, especially when you're on such a big stage as you are. It's the greatest gift that you can give people, and yourself is so nice. Oh my gosh. Go Emma. Okay, so talking about giving gifts, let's talk about the Flagstaff Pride 5K that you've continued to organize. You've raised apparently over \$170,000 for the Trevor Project, which is huge. Can you just talk a little bit to everybody about why this event is so central to your life and how since you've been involved, how it's grown so much?

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Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, no, it's definitely crazy how long it's been a thing. We started it in 2020 and that feels like forever ago and it's had different versions. We've hosted one in Flagstaff in 2022, which was awesome, but the rest of the ones have been virtual and we've also done stuff in San Diego. It is just had so many different, I guess, it's

evolved and yeah, we've raised so much money for these organizations, but I think just the way we've done it is what's really special to me is obviously the money is going towards LGBTQ people who really need it and that is the best thing ever.

It's happening by runners coming together and being like, "Hey, I'm queer, or I have a queer brother or queer sister, or Hey, I'm just an ally and want to support this." Then it's this physical representation of people coming together through running to be like, "Hey, we're here to support these causes." I think that's just so beautiful and something that would've meant so much to younger me was just seeing that representation of like, "Oh, this is how many people are behind me and it's okay to come out or it's okay to be myself and I'm going to have a community and family to land on." I think that's been really special to see that part of it and to see the kind of community grow, and there's always a cute shirt involved. It's just so fun.

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Bex Gentry: We love the shirts.

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Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, and I put it on with my best friends and that's just really fun and special to me. So yeah, this is I guess year six.

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Bex Gentry: Oh my gosh. Yeah.

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Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, so the sixth edition of it and yeah, it's exciting stuff.

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Bex Gentry: Amazing, and it keeps on growing. It keeps on getting there. Okay, so the industry, the track and field world, let's call it. Just quickly tell me about any surprises or any responses that you've experienced that have taken you about good or bad. It's up to you. You don't have to say one or the other about your advocacy and as your profile has grown exponentially really over the last one to two years.

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Nikki Hiltz: Oh my gosh, that's a good question. I don't know, I think it's just what's shocking to me is how there's so many issues in our world, but the hyper fixation of trans people being the biggest issue, I guess that's not unique to the track and field world. I don't know. I guess in

the end of the day there's less than 10 athletes who identify as transgender and I think two of them are trans women. It's just like, okay, I just think the hysteria, I think, blows my mind and I think that's something that's shocking. Then it's crazy too, for me, the most backlash I ever get is when I stand up for trans women, it's not even about me ever. It's like, how dare you stand up for this marginalized group of people who just want to exist? I'm like, okay.

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Bex Gentry: It's all bizarre, but that is like, yeah, that's so bizarre that you're like, don't use your voice.

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Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, and it just shows how much, I guess, scrutiny and hate trans woman or other, and it makes me really sad, but yeah, of course I'm going to stand up for my community and, of course, I think we should try to find a way to make sports a place for everyone. I don't think anyone should be excluded from this. I would love to keep having conversations to make space for those people and how do we do that? Yeah, that's what I'm interested in, and so I think I can handle a little bit of hate to in order to do that. Yeah, I also think I'm in a position of such privilege. I have such supportive family, I have such a supportive partner. Why would I not? I went to the ESPYs very shortly after the Olympic trials last year and Don Stanley, the South Carolina coach, gave this speech that was like, I feel like it changed my life.

It was like, "Hey, to all the athletes sitting out there right now or sitting in this room, you got here for a reason. You can call it talent and luck." She's like, "But at the end of day it's just a lot of luck you had to go through ... You never had a career ending injury, you never got derailed down the wrong path. All these things led to this moment where you can be in this room and be an athlete." She's like, "So that's luck, that's privilege. What are you going to do with it?" I felt like chills around my while body and I was like, "Wow, okay, yeah, I am this athlete and I have all these goals and dreams and I'm going to keep chasing them, but I'm going to stand up for people along the way and I'm going to stand up for my community. I'm going to stand up for myself and I'm going to try to make change as much as possible. Sorry, random alarms.

00:25:53

Bex Gentry: That's your alarm. I was really trying to have a sleep in today, you guys. Oh my gosh.

00:25:59

Nikki Hiltz: I don't know if that answers your question.

00:26:00

Bex Gentry: No, it does and I think it's really important that when it comes to how athletes use their platform, it's very individual and there is no rule, there is no training book for how any athlete is going to use their platform or their voice. Some athletes just go out there, they run their races, they do their sport and they go home. That's totally fine if that's what you need to do, that's what you need to do. I think as you said earlier, a marginalized community is one that needs so much more than an athlete that just comes, does the race and goes home. With your success and with your not luck, not just luck, I'm going, you got it. I agree with her, yes, it is a lot of luck, but there's a lot of grit that goes into it too.

Let's talk about Grand Slam track, okay, because that is now, the stage was huge last year. The stage was huge for the Olympics, but Grand Slam Track is like it's freaking cool and you've signed on as one of the headliners of Grand Slam Track. There was a lot of excitement about this new league. What drew you to it and what did you hope it would bring to the pro running world?

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Nikki Hiltz: Oh my gosh. I mean, when I first heard about it was I guess a year ago at this point, I was like, "I want to be a part of that." It's everything that I love about track. There's no pace lights, there's no rabbits. It's not about time trialing. It's about pure head-to-head racing and four people are going to be consistent in every event group and then four people are going to come in as challengers. I was like, that's such a cool concept. Then it's an eight and a 15. I was just like, sign me up. I was like, I'm ready. Obviously, I think I was like, well, I'm solid. I can commonly say I'm one of the best 1,500 runners in the country for sure, but I don't think I can really say that on the world stage. I'm getting there. I was seventh at the Olympics, so it's pretty good, but when you have two events like the eight and the 15 and you're going after the best in the world, I was like, I'll probably be a challenger. I'll come in, but I'm not going to get one of those racer spots. I think I was just kind of preparing myself.

Then in October, Kyle Murber sends Howie my agent and I an email and was like, "Hey, we want Nikki to be a racer in the short distance event group." I was like, oh my gosh, and then offered me a contract to join the league and I was like, "I would've done it for free. I would've done it for \$5. This is amazing." I was like, it was the quickest yes in my life. Then ever since it was, that was in

October, and then it was just this really fun, crazy buildup to Kingston, the first one in April. Yeah, it's awesome. I think, like I said, it's everything that I think we need to focus on because there's so much talk about fast times and pace lights and super shoes. Yeah, that's part of the evolution of our sport, but if we get too far away from racing and just head-to-head who is going to win this race, I think our sport's going to come really boring really fast because it's going to be like someone chasing a light around a track and then they don't catch the light and then it's like oh.

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Bex Gentry: It's like AI.

00:29:24

Nikki Hiltz: It's like, what is this? Yeah, I don't want my biggest competitor to be a light bulb. I'm sorry. I want it to be people. I don't know. I really loved, I think initially just the concept of it. I was just so bought in.

00:29:37

Bex Gentry: Yeah, it was, as you say, the concept was really cool. It was for anyone who doesn't know, we have new listeners, Nikki, we have our podcast, listen, but we also are now on iHeartRadio, so there might be some people out there who don't know too much about it. Grand Slam Track was going to be four meets, it starts in Kingston, correct me if I'm wrong on the order, but it was going to go to Philly, then Miami and then LA.

00:30:01

Nikki Hiltz: Miami, then Philly, then LA.

00:30:03

Bex Gentry: Miami, then Philly, then LA and it got through three rounds, and then the LA finale was canceled. You've gone through all of this hype, this would've been the quickest yes for \$5 or free, we will delete that one actually. How are you'll be like, no, no, no, no, she didn't say that. They didn't say that, but it was, what was the effect for you when you heard that the LA finale was going to be canceled? That's your season.

00:30:33

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, yeah, I think it was obviously initially it was like, whoa, I didn't know they would do that. I think it was a little bit shock. Then obviously I love to race and I was really looking forward. I had kind of a rough one in Philly, which was the third one. I was looking for

redemption and excited to do the grand finale in LA. Yeah, I think I would be lying if I said there was a little disappointment. I was like, oh, but once I was kind of explained why, I was like, "Oh, okay, that makes sense." I think I then was like, "Okay, well we had three great ones," and you also can't lose something you didn't never had. We never had the LA Grand Slam. We were looking forward to it and it was going to happen, but then it was like, okay, well I don't know, things get canceled.

They canceled, in 2020, they canceled the Olympic games. I think something about 2020 has maybe desensitized me to things have canceled. I'm like, "Oh, well, (inaudible) canceled." I'm like, I don't know, but I also just, it's hard to be mad at them or frustrated or I don't know, because I'm so grateful for the first three for what they gave us as the athletes, and I can't speak for everyone, I can just speak for my experience, but I had so much fun at those track meets and the stakes have never been higher. I've never had a prize purse where I'm going, if I'm first it's 100 K. If I'm second, it's 50 K, so those stakes are crazy. I've also never had more fun, and people were like, you could tell the athletes were just vibing and being like, "This is so awesome," and they just took such good care of us.

Michael Johnson is the founder of the league, the head commissioner, and he was obviously an athlete himself, and his team of people around him are also athletes. Like Kyle (inaudible), he's a professional runner. Marla Kay, she was a sprinter and they are the ones leading this thing. They know what athletes need and we're like, "Hey, we need meals." They're like, "Got it." We're like, "Hey--"

00:32:31

Bex Gentry: (inaudible) .

00:32:31

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, and the little things too of it's so hard a lot of times to get content after a race, it just, there's a million photographers there, but no one ever sends you anything and it's kind of frustrating. They were like, "Hey, we have this app for you where as soon as you finish your race, all your photos are going to be there." It's just like, what? Yeah, just little things like that and things like, Emma is my person's, if my coach isn't there or agent, she's both of those things and it's so hard.

00:33:01

Bex Gentry: Emma is working.

00:33:02

Nikki Hiltz: No, yeah, she's the camera person. She's like,

everything, support, athlete support to the T. It's so difficult in track and field to get Emma credential for things so I-

00:33:14

Bex Gentry: Really?

00:33:15

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, which is stupid. It's like, nope, she's not your coach or she's, and so Grand Slam, I'm like, "Hey, can I get a credential?" They're like, "Of course," and it's just so easy and stuff. Anyways, I could talk about Grand Slam all day, but I think it (inaudible) such a good job.

00:33:28

Bex Gentry: It sounds you think there is a future for these alternative pro track meets?

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Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, totally, and why not try? I think it's awesome that they tried and they built something really cool. Also, I think a part of canceling LA was to make sure that a 2026 season happened. If I'm looking like long-term, that's worth it for me.

00:33:50

Bex Gentry: As you say, it was an epic three meets, so there was fun had for sure. All right, let's talk about training to round this out because I'm sure there's a lot of people out there thinking, "I want to know what they do to stay in shape and be ready to rock those races that you love to do." I'd also selfishly, one of my dreams was, I say was, pre-baby and pre-career to be based somewhere at Arizona to train. You have a training group, you have people who you train with and there's people, there's days where you might train by yourself to be in the zone, in the race zone. Right now, what does that look like for you in Flagstaff and this insane elite community that you can lean on, learn from and push?

00:34:45

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah. No, I mean, I don't really have a group. I'm very much on my own. I have a coach that's remote and I have Emma that also has the same coach. We're both coached by Julie Benson, so it's kind of just like me and Emma versus the world, but Flagstaff is such an amazing place to live if that's your setup because there's so many other groups here or other people who have individual setups. I think of someone like Chrissy Gere, one of the best steeplechase in the nation. She lives here and she has a

remote coach. We sync up a lot because we're like, " Hey, what are you doing today?" Then there's the NAZ Elite group that lives here. There's the Dark Sky group. They're just such a community and I can go for my easy runs with a different person on a different trail every single day for a month probably, which is just so, yeah, it's just such a special-

00:35:36

Bex Gentry: Your group isn't a quintessential like the NAZ Elite, you don't have a specific group. Your group is, if you feel like it ...

00:35:47

Nikki Hiltz: Whoever I want.

00:35:47

Bex Gentry: ... you can pick somebody, or if you want to just have some solo miles or just you and Emma, you can.

00:35:53

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

00:35:56

Bex Gentry: (inaudible) .

00:35:55

Nikki Hiltz: Yesterday we went on a run, there was eight of us and just yapping about Love Island the whole time and people come into town too. Elise Cranny's here right now and she's going to be here till USAs and that's someone we're good friends. People, Emily Infeld's here right now, which I love going on a run for Emily, she's just so herself. I love it. There's people come in and out and the NAU track, which is where we train, is very open, which is lovely. I think having a track at 7, 000 feet is brutal, but amazing that we have access. Yeah, I think I tell people I'm in my Grant Fisher era, I kind of am like, okay, I have my coach who's very, our workouts and stuff and what we do are very catered to me, very individualized. I am picking and choosing what I want to do when, and it's very empowering in, okay, yeah, I maybe left this group, but now I'm going to go off on my own and it's going to be epic. Yeah, that's kind of the journey I'm on right now.

00:37:01

Bex Gentry: That sounds, as you said, very empowering and freeing and a really good way to continue to love running. I know a lot of our listeners go through phases and I myself do as well. I feel like when there's too much rigidity in my program, I start to fall away from my love and my passion

for running. I hate that because then I get scared. That's when I'm like, "Yeah, no, this is a lot of who I am and I need to love this, so I need to change something else in this program because I need to love it. I need to love it every day." That's super cool that you can just be like this, "Today is, This feels good to do this." Then when the time comes where you need to hone in on whatever it is, then you feel like you've had that freedom beforehand to be like, "Okay, cool. I'm good with this is now this block." That's so nice.

00:37:58

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, totally.

00:37:59

Bex Gentry: Okay. Talking about whatever is next, you've made Olympic final. You are, I think, one of the most well-known faces in track and definitely in advocacy for representation in the sports world. I'm not going to say what's next. I personally freaking hate it when people ask me that, but I want to know about your definition of what fulfills you and your, you and running. We don't need to go any further, you and running. Then what is on your radar right now for Nikki Hiltz's feeling fulfilled?

00:38:46

Nikki Hiltz: I like that. I love that wording of it. This is going to sound so weird, but my goal for USAs this year is I want to go to dinner with my coach and training partners after the race, whatever happens, that's what I want. I feel like that's something I've been missing and I've had such high highs the past two years, but I feel like I want to build more of a support system for myself, and I would love to win again. Obviously, I love winning, but my measure of success in a race is if I run a race I'm proud of, and if I am smart during the race and don't make too many errors, every race can't be perfect, but I walk away happy and if I kick hard, the last 200. Things like that are kind of my measures of success. Usually when I do that, I'm pretty happy with the outcome.

Those are my goals for USAs is do that and then go to dinner with the people that helped get me to that moment and were on the journey with me afterwards. Then as far as the global stage, kind of the same thing. I want to run three rounds at the Tokyo World Champs, three 1,500s that I'm really proud of and I want to, when the bell rings in Tokyo, be able to touch whoever the leader is. I think in Paris, I was seventh and I'm so proud of that race and it was such, I went out in 2:03, I think through 800, which is so fast, and that's something that used to really scare

me as an athlete. I was afraid to go out in 2:10. I would be like, "Oh my God, I'm not going to have my kick."

To go on 2:03, I was like, "I don't care what happens at this point. I put myself in it and here we go." Then just with the lap to go, I kind of got bumped and it was the Olympic final. Of course, everyone's kicking at the same time. And then I kind of got deattached and then I kicked hard the last 300, but I'm by myself. I'm not really in the race anymore, so, yeah, so I think taking that experience and applying it to Tokyo, the World Championships this year, I'm like, I want to with 400 to go be in such a good position that there's no excuse not to use my kick. I think things like that are what really excite me and are motivating me. When the training gets hard, long and boring, just think of the excitement of when the bell rings and how badly you want to be there. Yeah, I think that's kind of where I'm at and I'm excited for, yeah, I guess, this year feels so much different than last year. I felt like last year was so much stress.

What we started this conversation with the trials and the Olympics and you're kind of just tense the whole year. Like it's an Olympic.

00:41:20

Bex Gentry: It's massive.

00:41:21

Nikki Hiltz: (inaudible) what happened. It feels like this year is a breath of fresh air like, "Oh, I can try new things like Grand Slam," and it's really fun and awesome and I got to race some of the best people in the world and those event groups and now I can like, "Okay, I can go into USAs and do this and that," so yeah,

00:41:39

Bex Gentry: The fulfillment is there, I can feel it. The smile on your face right now, our listeners can't see it, but everyone, you're missing out because it feels like Nikki has got fulfillment in sight. That is, I think, a huge message because as long as you give your best and you walk away from that meet, that race and you go to dinner with your loved ones and your support team and you can sit down and you can all hug, high five, whatever is your chosen celebration and feel really proud individually and collectively, that is fulfillment I think. I think that's really important for people because there can only be one winner and it sucks, but you all win if you can come away and go, "I count that, that was amazing. That's awesome that person won, but I won for me."

Thank you for sharing that and thank you for everything

that you do for the sport, for raising awareness for non-binary transgender athletes around the world. Thank you for being you, showing up and thanks to Emma for being an incredible athlete, but also part of your incredible support. I love that it's like the two of you against the world as you put it when it comes to training and picking what you're doing. Nikki, I know all of us cannot wait to see you on your next stage, and I cannot wait to see an Instagram post of you at dinner afterwards, enjoying every moment of it, so thank you from the bottom of my heart.

00:43:26

Nikki Hiltz: Yeah, that's so sweet. Thank you so much. This has been awesome, and you ask really good questions, Bex, I was like, oh my gosh. Stumped a couple times.

00:43:35

Bex Gentry: Sorry, but not sorry.

00:43:36

Nikki Hiltz: No, thank you. This has been awesome, and yeah, I love New York Roadrunners. Yay.

00:43:54

Speaker 3: New York Roadrunners is a nonprofit organization with a vision to build healthier lives and stronger communities through the transformative power of running. The support of members and donors like you helps us achieve our mission to transform the health and wellbeing of our communities through inclusive and accessible running experiences, empowering all to achieve their potential. Learn more and contribute at [nyrr.org/donate](http://nyrr.org/donate).

00:44:18

Bex Gentry: Mauricio Blandino was at home in Jackson Heights, Queens in 2011 when he fell down the stairs and suffered a traumatic brain injury. The injury left him unable to walk or even maintain his own balance by himself. After emergency surgery and months of intensive physical therapy, he slowly regained his mobility. He joined Achilles International, a running club that pairs athletes with disabilities, with volunteer guides and step-by-step, he went from walking to jogging to running again. Since then, Mauricio has completed numerous races including eight New York City marathons and he has even qualified for the Boston Marathon. Today, he leads the New York City chapter of the Brain Injury Association, helping other brain injury survivors find community and support in their recovery. Meb is here with Mauricio today as he prepares for this weekend's Achilles hope and possibility of four miles presented by TD Bank taken away,

Meb.

00:45:19

Meb: Thanks, Bex. Mauricio, welcome to Set the Pace. Where are you today?

00:45:25

Mauricio Blandino: Thank you, Meb. I appreciate the invitation to be part of the New York Road Runners at the Pace. I'm in Queens, New York. I'm a resident of Queens.

00:45:34

Meb: Awesome. Well, glad to have you. Can you help us, our audience understand how life-changing your traumatic brain surgery was for you?

00:45:42

Mauricio Blandino: Well, it will be 14 years exactly tomorrow that I sustained a traumatic brain injury. I had a fall down the steps of my home with a hard blow to my head at the end of the landing. It required a bilateral craniotomy on both sides of my head to clip the bleeders I had internally. I had a long stay in the hospital where it came to be known that I had issues with balance, coordination, other issues developed with cognitive issues, the physical, the visual issues too. I lost part of my peripheral also, depth perception, difficult to run and the conversions we eyes meet and focus on detail. When I'm running, it's a bit of a hazard because I'm not seeing the road as it is. I'm almost seeing a blank slate. I run with a high step to avoid any irregularities to it.

It affected me physically as far as the balance coordination where and also, weakness on my right leg. It interfered with my walking. Like I mentioned, there was the visual aspect to it, the cognitive aspect to it too. Walking, well, it required a tremendous amount of physical therapy to my understanding now to strengthen my inner core, to help myself stay upright. Till this day, I have an issue with my balance and coordination. I walk with a very tight core and if I relax, I start listing from one side to another, appearing a bit drunk, you could say, but it's something I learned to manage.

There's an issue with my memory. Sometimes I lose focus of what I'm saying or what comes out. It interferes with my conversation many times in a group setting. It took a while to accept the situation as far as my brain injury. I lost my employment, my identity, you could say, because I think everyone's identity relates to what one does in life, employment-wise. I lost that, which I was in the jewelry manufacturing industry here in New York City, I could not go

back to it. That's all I did. My studies working for companies, manufacturing. It was a wonderful life. I was living there. It became internal conflict to accept that loss. It took time to accept it. I had to stop and pause and be grateful for the time period I had doing that. Depression, anxiety also, stemmed from clinical setting, more of a clinical issues that evolved from the brain injury, which still in effect to this day,

00:49:05

Meb: I could only imagine how many obstacles you have overcome and challenges, but you have come at the other side of it to say how were you able from not being able to walk and be able to rehabilitation from walking to eventually run, and how has running played a big role in your life now?

00:49:22

Mauricio Blandino: At this moment in time, running has created a steel platform for me to stand on. As though the rug was pulled underneath me. It took a long time to really feel steady in my life and running established. That gave me a whole sense of accomplishment.

00:49:44

Meb: Well, not only you are just a runner, but you have done the New York City Marathon. You have accomplished the London Marathon and even the Boston Marathon. What does it feel like for you to cross the marathon finish line and knowing how far you have come since 2011?

00:50:00

Mauricio Blandino: My first marathon was in 2015, the New York City Marathon. It took a village to get even started with the training. It took three years after joining Achilles International to take part in the marathon. Crossing that finish line was an immense sense of empowerment. It gave that sense of control of my body, again, allowing me to know that if I accomplish this, I could then apply it to just about anything else that I would face in life. The dedication I applied to my training was something new that I learned to do. Now, Meb, I was not a runner prior to my injury. I never ran before. I did cycle. I did a lot of charity rides for charity events, but that was my only physical activity. My brothers were the ballplayers and I didn't take to running. I quickly have to jump to Achilles. I joined Achilles to continue with the introduction of the physical therapy I was going through.

My doctors had insisted to take my PT out of the clinic. I had isolated myself through depression, anxiety were

overwhelming, where I was just going in and out from clinic to home, and he knew I needed to go out and do more with my physical recovery. I had joined the Brain Injury Association of New York State's support groups and their social groups where one day, this was a year and a half after my injury, Achilles International was a guest speaker. They had this individual who was a brain injury survivor himself, Alan, who spoke about his achievements. I listened more closely because of his experience with a brain injury, and the staff of Achilles spoke about the benefits of physical activity, the socialization factor, that community sense, which I was not really understanding what it was all about. A group of us from the Brain Injury Association went to an Achilles workout one Saturday morning, and there I saw this incredible group of individuals, all different challenges. The energy was so biting that I didn't know how to take it. Everyone was just moving ahead with their lives, talking about their accomplishments, what they were going to be doing next, and I'm seeing individuals of all different challenges here, visually impaired, other brain injury survivors, amputees moving on with their lives, and I was not there at that moment. Achilles came and I took on Achilles to continue with my physical therapy to walk with a volunteer to regain that left and right coordination and hold it for a minute or two, and then I would lose control of it and then repeat and repeat over and over again. The process continued until I was able to then throw in a jog and hold it for an extended period of time. I took note of what was happening with my body, and the motivation from others, so important to have around you. Like I mentioned, I was not a runner. My only attention was for my recovery, the physical therapy to continue with it, and that's how it kept on going. I wasn't given attention to other people's really, not given attention to their races and whatnot. That was for them. I had my own agenda to deal with, my recovery, and it slowly evolved.

00:53:42

Meb: It only evolved, you have done an amazing thing with the Achilles and taking care of yourself and walking to running, and now when we were off the stage behind the scene, we were talking about how you are also giving back now to your mom as a caretaker, and that's a full circle, and you are a true champion doing a lot of great things to take care of yourself first and then helping others and then have to take care of your mom and to compare to where you were in 2011. That's amazing.

00:54:06

Mauricio Blandino: Yeah. I've become a advocate for the brain

injury community. I call on my local representatives to meet up in Albany with them, to go over issues that are affecting housing, healthcare, care in general, not just for brain injury survivors, but for the disability community in general. I think more so now, more attention needs to be given to that. I was up in Albany just this past spring. I've been doing that for a number of years. I've been more involved with the Brain Injury Injury Association, knowing that, seeing how it helped me and seeing how it's helped others. It's another community similar to Achilles sense of knowing. Well, it's a more tighter knit because we know each other's issues, we discuss each other's issues more freely, our brain injury, so it's a community that needs to continue for the benefit of our health.

00:55:07

Meb: Well, we're so grateful your difference maker, and thank you for sharing your story and impacting others with the similar or same injuries that you have had and so grateful to have you on the podcast to share your story. Mauricio, thanks for being with us.

00:55:21

Bex Gentry: Thank you for joining us, Mauricio and for being a member of New York Roadrunners. Now to the final part of our show, our Meb Minute.

00:55:29

Meb: Recovery ritual (inaudible) pays off. Paying attention to small detail is so important when you, sometimes we think about workout, workout, workout, but recovery starts immediately after you finish. You'll go down, have a banana or apple with peanut butter within 30 minutes. You have to have something solid in your body, whether it's a shake, whether it's fruits, having done those, it would help the muscles get the nutrients it needs. Small actions are important because you are able to be proactive. What does that mean? You have to do the stretching. You have to do ice baths. If you are in a beautiful mountain, just like I used to do in the river, jump in there, or if you are in the city, hot, I mean, cool. Shower is very important. You also sometimes want to strength training or massage that you need to be good for the body.

You want to be able to do pre-hab instead of rehab because you want to be able to take care of your body so it can carry you consistently week in, months in to be able to do that. More importantly, you want to finish up with a good night's sleep as you need to session the summer. If you're going to get up early in the morning train, you need to go to bed early, and don't worry about if you have a

race and you don't sleep the night before, because consistent training and consistent sleeping will take care of it on race day.

00:56:47

Bex Gentry: That does it for another episode of Set the Pace. Thank you to today's guests, Nicki Hiltz and Mauricio Blandino. If you liked this episode, please go ahead and subscribe, rate or leave a comment for the show on whatever platform you are listening on. This not only helps us, but it helps others find out about the show too. Take care.