

HEINRICH POPOW

Seize the challenge.

“If I’d lost an arm, I would have become a shot putter”

Answers from Heinrich Popow

How did you become a competitive athlete?

Sport was always my passion. I’m a huge football fan and, like every other little boy, at one time I wanted to become a professional player. I started in competitive sport when I was 18. My results were pretty good from the outset, so I stayed with it. I have been training with Bayer 04 Leverkusen for over 10 years.

As a child, you lost a leg to cancer. What made you choose running sport anyway?

I don’t run in spite of but because of my amputation. If I’d lost an arm, I would probably have become a shot putter. If life presents you with challenges, you have to accept them. But in all seriousness, what’s important to me is to have a goal in sight – and it doesn’t matter how big it is. In fact, I’d even say, the more unattainable the better. Anybody can transcend their limits – they just have to want to.

Have you ever doubted yourself?

Even if it all sounds so easy now, of course I’ve had setbacks in my life. I had my problems, particularly as an adolescent, and I even used to get picked on sometimes. I am happy that I have so many friends who give me strength. My family is very important to me too. I have blind trust in them. I know they’ll catch me if I fall.

Who is your role model?

One thing was always clear to me: A role model would have to give me all-round inspiration, not just in one discipline or because of a certain skill. Lots of people in my life have made an impression on me but I’ve never chased after any one role model.

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Do you see yourself as a role model?

I want to show people that even the impossible is possible in life. If somebody wants to be a role model, it's not enough to be able to run fast. You have to touch people. I want my character and manner to encourage people. If somebody sees me as a role model, of course I feel proud.

What do you do when you're not training?

I am not a full professional and therefore have to earn a living with normal work. At the moment, I am training as an orthopaedic technician. My employer supports my sport career very much, this allows me having enough time for practicing sports.

Your running prosthesis looks very high-tech. What influence does the material have on your performance?

Everybody always thinks that a sport prosthesis is a high-tech product. But the real miracle is my everyday prosthesis. In contrast, sport prostheses have a relatively simple structure. The secret of running is to coordinate the "healthy" side with the prosthetic side. I need to have the steering of the prosthesis under control every moment. And what's more far more important than the technology is the human factor: After all, I run with the prosthesis, the prosthesis doesn't run with me.

How much does a prosthesis cost?

It varies greatly. Running prostheses are far cheaper than everyday prostheses that can cost several tens of thousands of euros. For many years, I've been supported by the prosthesis manufacturer, Otto Bock Healthcare. Otto Bock provides me with prostheses free of charge. In exchange, I help to develop the technology. I do a lot of tweaking on the prosthesis myself - and this also helps people who rely on a prosthesis in day-to-day life. I'm proud when findings from competitive sport are applied to everyday technology.

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What do you think about when you get into the starting blocks?

In the changing rooms just before the start, it's still fairly laid back. You joke around with the other runners and you're relaxed. But once you go out into the stadium, onto the track, it's like being in a tunnel. You've only got the track in front of you. I go through the race again in my head: the start, getting out of the blocks, and the first steps. And once the race gets started - total concentration and running flat out. It's a great feeling.

What goes through your mind when you think about the Paralympics?

The Paralympics are the greatest for me - even better than the Olympics. Sport is even more to the fore here. You have the chance to prove yourself, to show what you've achieved with work over the last four years. That entails quite a lot of pressure too because this is a one-off chance. The Paralympics mean more to me: I enjoy meeting old friends again. For me, it's a bit like coming home. It's a shame that the individual athletes are always only in the stadium very briefly but the whole atmosphere is great and, unfortunately, it's over far too quickly.

What role does your disability play in your life?

I don't feel disabled. Disabilities start up here, in your head. You have to be strong. That's something I want to get across to people: Don't give up just because you've lost an arm or a leg. Maybe that even means you can achieve more!

What would you have become if you had kept your leg?

To be honest, I can't imagine life with two real legs anymore. If someone were to come up to me and say "here's your leg back", I'd send them away. My life is good the way it is, I don't want a different one.

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For many people, a prosthesis is the end of the world. How did you feel when you realised that you would lose your leg?

Certainly, it was bad to start with, and my parents almost suffered more than I did, but the amputation quickly proved to be a new start. The prosthesis - or as I say - my leg, turned me into what I am today. It means that I don't feel disabled in everyday life either. My leg is like a shoe that fits well. I put it on in the morning and I wear it all day without giving it a thought. Then in the evening I take it off, and put it on again in the morning. That's the way it is with my leg too.

Sport comes first for you. What comes second?

I often visit people in hospital who have just had an amputation. Just as it was for me back then, a world has collapsed for these people. I encourage them and say: "Hey, life goes on. You can still do everything and achieve everything with a prosthesis." And when I show them my prosthesis, with most people you can see the hope flickering in their eyes again. I am still in touch with many of these people. That is extremely important to me.

What's the easiest aspect of your training?

If it were up to me, I would just sprint all day. The training camps where we train sprinting strength are the highlight for me. It's great fun in Lanzarote. Propelled by the Canary Islands tailwind, we run significantly above our own sprint speed. It's like flying. An amazing feeling!

What comes after your athletic career?

I definitely want to do something that will help other people. It has to fulfil me. Ideally it would be an activity that would let me pass on my message, and bring in my experience of sport and with the prosthesis. I could also imagine taking responsibility for young athletes and passing on my knowledge and experience to others.

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Seize the Challenge – what does that mean for you?

I have always fought for things, for as long as I can think. I have always challenged myself, never running away or backsliding. And that's how I understand the motto "Seize the Challenge". Accepting your challenges – and seeing an opportunity in everything that happens.

On a race day, what's the first thing you do after you get up?

I try to relax during the day and build up my concentration. Apart from that, I'm always in a pretty good mood. That happiness then transfers itself to the competition.