Yale Talk: Conversations with President Peter Salovey

Episode 3: Yale student-athletes on three-point shots, resilience, and the joy of basketball

**Peter Salovey:** Hello everyone. I'm Peter Salovey. And I'm delighted to welcome you to another episode of Yale talk. At Yale, we believe that learning takes place across our campus not only in labs and classrooms but also in residential colleges, performance spaces, and in Payne Whitney gymnasium. Today excited to host a special conversation with two of our remarkable student athletes, Azar Swain and Tori Andrew. Azar as a junior and a guard on the men's basketball team and Tori is a junior and a guard on the women's basketball team. Azar, Tori, thank you so much for joining me today on Yale Talk.

**Tori:** Thank you for having us.

**Azar:** Thank you.

**Peter Salovey:** One of the things I like to talk about a lot when people ask me, why do Ivy league universities have athletics programs and what do you want Yale’s athletics program to emphasize. I talk a lot about the life skills that being an athlete helps one develop. I talk about self-discipline, and time management and working as part of a team. But one of the qualities of being human that I think athletics really helps develop and then I find particularly interesting is resilience. Even the very best of athletes, and you guys are playing at an incredibly elite level, and you're statistical leaders nationally in free throws and in three point shooting particularly you do very well. And yet a certain percentage of your shots aren't going to go in and you deal with failure in every game. Every day probably in every several minutes of every game. And yet you pick yourselves up and continue on and do something great. My question really is how do you do that. How do you do it? You know for those of us who haven't had the privilege and experience of playing athletics at this level maybe we're a little more inclined to be in our heads when things aren't going our way and be distracted by them.

**Tori:** Sure.

**Peter Salovey**: But I never see you guys do that Tori do you want to start?

**Tori:** Yeah, I think one thing that is kind of unique especially about basketball and the amount of shots you have to take is a great three point shooter is considered to be about between 40 and 45 percent.

**Peter Salovey:** You’re missing more than you make.

**Tori:** Exactly. You’re missing. And you are considered elite at that level so to be a great shooter is is just to be confident. I mean obviously there comes a lot of preparation and skill behind it to get to that 40 percent mark but necessarily out of every 10 you shoot you're gonna miss six so it takes a lot of missed shots to get to the point where you just you value the ones that you make more. And like you said as we've talking art our teams rely on us for three-point shooting so we don't really have the time nor the privilege to hang our heads and get bummed about those missed shots because that's not the important part. We're there to shoot the ball. Our captain this year Megan German who is just a fantastic leader. There are sometimes I get frustrated about a missed shot and she'll come over to me and she says every time you shoot the ball we score a point, one point statistically because I have a 40 percent shot margin.

**Peter Salovey:** Yeah.

**Tori:** That regardless of that goes in or not statistically it's one point.

**Peter Salovey:** So, the expected value of your shot is point four times three.

**Tori:** Exactly. Yes. Yeah. So, it's just it's one of those things where.

**Peter Salovey:** I like that.

**Tori:** Exactly. Yes. And. And again to have to have that encouragement come from your teammates is fantastic. But I think as far as how that translates to life is it's just everything is not going to go in every shot is not going to go in, every decision you make is not going to come out exactly the way you want to, but the value I think that that sports has, has had on my life at least is just you keep doing your best you try to shoot to make it every time and if it goes in or not so be it. But you put in the work to set yourself up to a position to even get to that 40 percent margin and then you have the confidence to continue to take that shot regardless of the outcome.

**Peter Salovey:** That's wonderful and that's a Yale athlete talking. You don't look at these shots as binary. They either go in or they don’t go in.

**Tori**: yea it is a collective.

**Peter Salovey**: You look at that as probabilistic.

**Tori:** yea love of large numbers. Exactly so keep shooting. Yea.

**Peter Salovey**: Keep shooting.... Azar I've heard you say something. Any number of times when I've read a newspaper article about a Yale men's basketball game; for example, where you always say some shots go in and some shots don't go in you just got to move on or something like that. Well what is your philosophy in staying resilient to dealing with disappointment.

**Azar:** Yeah, it's similar to the late Kobe Bryant's philosophy where he has a mindset of just keep going. So, I mean athletics and be an athlete it's a bumpy road it's up and down especially with basketball and being a shooter. It’s something that you need to put a lot of work and time into, so a lot of the resiliency comes from just trusting your work and the time you put in to be a good shooter. But I mean in all aspects its applicable past just shooting the ball and you know do your best in the game. Keep going in life and I think that can be translated to having a job and having a family later on and that’s something that you know I try to live by every day.

**Peter Salovey**: Don’t look back, keep looking forward. Yes, yeah. Very good. So, we talked a little bit about disappointment. Let’s talk about success. Each of you I’m sure has a proudest moment so far. As an athlete at Yale and maybe you could share those with us? Tory you want to start?

**Tori**: I think seeing think one singular moment for our program since I've been here has been my freshman year. We were the first Ivy League school to win in a postseason tournament in a basketball tournament. We won that WPI my freshman year and it was it was really a grind to get there and it was fun to be a part of a program in that group of girls specifically that it was just you know we just put our head down and we worked and there was a game we played South Alabama I think in the semifinals of the WBI and we were down I think 12 or 15 with a minute left. And at that point we had already missed our spring break and our season had had been gone out very long and we were like “you know what, we're already here. We're not going home at this point. We might as well just win the game and with a minute left we came back and we won our stretch and we won the game and we just really came together and it was a very special moment for me because it was just like completely there's no time left there's no time to worry about anything. We just came and we looked at each other really. We're gonna win this game and it wasn't a concern about any mistakes. There was no time to be upset about a missed shot or a turnover foul. It just doesn't matter. Next play we're moving on. I think outside of a specific moment this season for me, it has been a very proud, you know, very drawn out moment because last year we had the same five starters as we do this year. So same expectations, same goals, same talent level, and we fell short. We felt very short of where we wanted to be. And so, over the summer you know all of us talked about. It's not it's going to take more than talent. This point it's gonna take more than just being able to juggle the ball better than someone else or shoot better and it's going to take, like I said earlier, it can take a village. It's going to take every single person on this team to come together and we have found great success. We've put ourselves in a position to make the NCAA tournament possibly you know and at the least that the WNIT which is a big moment for our program in general. I'm so proud of this team this year because we haven't really changed up who's playing and who's not it's just a mindset shift which I think is imperative to where this team is going you know the future of our program and Coach Booth has done a great job of fostering that community and in that sense of just you know utter will to win.

**Peter Salovey:** Fantastic. How about you? You have been a part of many comebacks. You must have a favorite moment for either team or personal success.

**Azar:** Yeah. Two automatically come to mind. First, is Ivy championship last year. You know you don't realize the moment when you're when you're in it. But to see the support that we got on the NCAA tournament run and you know the happiness that we brought to some fans and the people that supported our team. It's just something that, you know, that you don't take for granted. Looking back, especially, you know, that's something that to you want to replicate. So, we're trying to get back there this year and you know win another championship for the school and you know for our program. And the other one is when I, it's a little bit of a bittersweet moment because we lost the game, but I broke the single season three-point record for three pointers made in a season and I didn't really understand it in the moment because I'm a very competitive person. So, in the postgame interviews they're asking how does it feel, and stuff like that. And I didn’t even realize.

**President Salovey**: You don't realize.

**Azar**: But you know I had some time to reflect on a little bit of my family and it's something that is crazy to think about just the long history of Yale athletics and I think it's like a 30-year-old record. So, I mean I'm just grateful to be in the position because you know I'm not really supposed to be here. It took a lot to get into Yale and it took a lot for my coaches to have trust in me the way that they do now to be able to break the record like that. It's been a long time been a long time coming and you know those are two moments that you know I really hold dear to my heart.

**Peter Salovey**: Let’s talk a little bit about three-point shooting for an interlude here. Then I'm going to ask you at the end about leadership. So, three-point shooting, you're both, as I mentioned, among the best three point shooters in the country, which is really something to be proud of. You both look so comfortable and natural shooting sometimes from really from downtown and often you may get a lot of good looks but usually the other team always knows you're going to take that shot. You're both shooters you're both gonna shoot from the outside. And so, what you might consider an open shot always looks to me like somebody’s got their hand in your face. And yet as you say a high percentage of them relatively speaking, go in. How do you do it? How do you think about it? I know practice is a big part of it, but there's some kind of mindset that must be working for you? Azar do you want to start?

**Azar:** I mean that that mindset comes from years of work and repetition. You know to be

good at something to be great at something it takes a lot of time and a lot of repetition. So that's kind of

where that mindset… And when you're so comfortable with your work in and how many reps

you've taken in when nobody's in the gym. You don’t really think about it in the games or when the game is on the line and things like that.

**Peter Salovey:** Yea so you have made that shot tens of thousands of times in practice.

**Azar:** Right.

**Peter Salovey**: So, you kind of internalize that shot. You just know that: I’ve made this shot many many times, so I am going to put it up there.

**Azar**: Yea.

**Peter Salovey**: How about you Tori?

**Tori:** Yeah. I mean like Azar said it really is just like having confidence in those reps. I had a coach tell me when I was younger, and I was still trying to figure out how to learn to shoot and have good form. Is that shooting is purely just a function of time put in. All it is just reps over and over again and I think that’s a lesson that you can learn and apply that to your life outside of here. I thought that off the court it's just you put in the work necessarily your outputs going to go up a little bit. But like Azar said you just you've taken that shot so many times and you have muscle memory that just knows exactly what you're supposed to do. It just becomes a part of the game it's just like running up and down the court. You know that when you catch the ball you shoot it and when you have to move somewhere you move your legs, and when you shoot the ball you move your arms. It's kind of just…it's the same type of thing it's the same type of skill and discipline and just continued Reps where it just becomes so natural and second nature. I mean it truly is. And it's not a thought. You know, it's not like oh I need to shoot now, I have to tuck my elbow in and hold my follow through and make sure my guide hand is straight. It’s just what you do its part of the game.

**Peter Salovey**: I think that's the difference between someone who plays at your level and somebody plays at my level. When I turned 60, 1 decided to take up golf. I played a little bit when I was young, like in my 20s, but hadn't really played in a lot of years and I don't get to play very much, but I'm still with every shot sort of thinking about: okay, is my setup right? Is my grip, right? Am I really looking at the ball? Are my shoulders in the right places, my arm, my knees bent? I look forward to the day when I'm just up there and it's a natural part of moving and like breathing, as opposed to feeling like a checklist of mechanics and you guys are so far beyond the mechanical stage. It’s a joy to watch.

**Azar**: I actually heard a funny quote growing up I think I heard my senior year of high school this former NBA players dad who said that a miss shot is better than a turnover so that kind of mindset of not thinking about the shots that you might take in games or the distance, just trusting you work, and that goes a long way.

**Peter Salovey**: I like that. You have a chance to score when you throw up a missed shot, maybe it will be an offensive rebound when you throw up that shot, right? It's not a turnover. I love that. Literally and metaphorically. I know you guys are both very modest and don't like talking about yourselves but uh why what's the statistic right now in this season. As of today, that your most proud of for yourself.

**Tori:** I think for me it would be either my free throw percentage or my assists. Free throws, I think for me, free throws are purely just discipline. Because it is the same shot every single time nothing ever changes and there is no one guarding you it’s just you and the ball and the hoop. And so, if you figure out said I where you have to put your arm and how to move your elbow and you if you do that the exact same way, it should go in every single time.

**Peter Salovey:** Both of you are on team, the men team and the women’s team that kind of compliment your style and are very balanced. Both are women's team and our men's team both very balanced and in the kind of game we play that got people playing with special specialties and special skills in all different parts of the game. It's great to see when it comes together as a team. Having said that, we're also in the business of educating aspiring leaders for all sectors of society throughout the world. That's part of what we say Yale's purpose is. What has athletics at Yale taught you about leadership?

**Tori:** I think you touched on earlier. Inherently there's self-discipline involved. You know you have to manage your time well you have to be able to perform at a high level and everything you're doing all throughout the day. But I think the two other tenants that athletics has really taught me especially since I've been at Yale. First and foremost, is service to others. I think it's been having to come in and show up and work as hard as you can, possibly work and still maybe not succeeding. The other day we have a clinic for women in sports and that day we lost that game and we had to turn around in about 15 minutes from walking off the court to going out and holding a clinic for girls who were excited about their prospects in basketball. Coach I think did a great job right after the game just being like we had a tough loss today and we'll figure that out as a team. But right now, what's more important is that we go out there and we inspire the next generation of women who want to perform and play this game and be a part of that community. And then you know on top of that is finding your roll. The game plan changes every game necessarily so some days I'm looked at to shoot a lot of outside shots some days I'm left to play defense and I pass the ball. And so, to do that and to just find out the way that you are to serve others day in and day out I think has been something that has really impacted me. The second one I think is just the commitment to a common goal. Like I said finding your goal each day whatever you have to do it to win the game or to find success is a program. I think is a lesson that I've learned particularly here at Yale, that that will influence me for the rest of my life is just you do what you can. You kind got to check your pride at the door it doesn't matter individually what my stats are. It is it matters at the end of the day that we have a W and in the win column. So, I think those two specifically have really shined through my Yale athletics experience.

**Peter Salovey**: That is great to hear. That is great to hear. I love that story lose the game but the important point in the moment is not to become preoccupied with the loss but rather to focus on the people that are waiting for you and are excited to see you.

**Tori**: Yeah and it was so much fun to go out there. I mean you know you're bummed about the loss to immediately go out into the Lanman Center and there's hundreds of young kids that are just so excited to be there and to be able to kind of give them the joy that this game has brought me and give that to those girls and watch our entire team, you know, just dedicate themselves to teaching these young kids who are just so excited to be there, and kind of aw struck with the division one athlete type of thing. It was it was truly a beautiful moment and it was one of those that I’ll remember for a long time.

**Peter Salovey**: That’s fantastic. How about you Azar? What is what's the big leadership lesson that you have learned?

**Azar**: Along with the resiliency and you know hard work that we talked about. I would have to say you know being able to relate to the people that you that you're trying to lead I think a good leader relates to the individuals that make up the group and that enhances in the performance of the group. So I've had the opportunity to build relationships with people in athletics and people outside of athletics you know just being placed freshman year with you know a random variety of students that goes a long way in building you know how personable you are and how well you can understand others. So I've been exposed to a very diverse array of people you know in my time here at Yale. So being able to relate to each person and being personable with them and showing that you care about the little things that goes along with being a successful leader.

**Peter Salovey**: Great. Well I want to thank both of you for speaking with us today and wish you the best of luck as the season as it wraps up. I will be there rooting for you as often as I can be. You know it’s amazing to consider how much our student athletes learned through their sports. Resilience, sacrifice, discipline, teamwork, integrity; these are qualities that will serve you well in everything you do at Yale and beyond. Our student athletes are a source of pride for the entire Yale community. Please if you have a chance to cheer on the Bulldogs at home or on the road I hope you will go. Our students love to see you in the stands or on the sidelines. And I guarantee you'll have a lot of fun too. Tori, Azar, I know your schedules are very full and so I appreciate you taking the time to be here today and thank you. Good luck with the rest of your seasons. To our friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining us for Yale talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.

The theme music, “Butterflies and Bees,” is composed by Yale Professor of Music and Director of University Bands Thomas C. Duffy and is performed by the Yale Concert Band.