

[00:00:00] **Stephen Calabria:** From the Mount Sinai Health System in New York City. This is Road to Resilience, a podcast about facing adversity. I'm Stephen Calabria.

[00:00:10] On this episode, we welcome Lesley Paterson, a five-time world champion triathlete, as well as an actor and Oscar-nominated screenwriter. Leslie toiled in the film industry for years, trying for over a decade to make a film adaptation of the classic novel All Quiet on the Western Front.

[00:00:28] Leslie had attempted to finance the film's production by running and winning triathlons. Even when she was successful, the process pushed Leslie to her physical and psychological limits. It culminated in one make or break triathlon, where Leslie had to fight through a serious injury to even compete. And in the process showed the true meaning of grit.

[00:00:49] From her home in Los Angeles, we're pleased the great Lesley Paterson on the show.

[00:00:55] Lesley Paterson, welcome to Road to Resilience.

[00:00:58] **Lesley Paterson:** Hello, it's great to meet you.

[00:01:00] **Stephen Calabria:** Great to meet you. So your life is so incredible that if it was being pitched in a writer's room, it'd probably be rejected for being so implausible that it borders on ridiculous. To kick us off, you're something of a lifelong triathlete. What first prompted your interest in running triathlons?

[00:01:19] **Lesley Paterson:** Yeah. Do you know, I've always been an athlete since I came out of the womb and my mother will attest to that. I used to race around the local grass, the local square, the local park, you know, very competitive. So I think it's been in my blood from a young age.

[00:01:34] I love movement. I've got a lot of energy. So I jumped into the sport of rugby when I was very young. I was only seven years old. And I played as the only girl in an all-boys team. And in fact, I was the only girl in the whole of Scotland at the time. This was in the eighties, of course, a little bit different now.

[00:01:48] And my niece now plays, in an, an all-boys team. But, yeah, so I think that that built a lot of resiliency from early on, right? I was walking on the pitch, people were laughing and joking and pointing, and I committed to what it was I loved about the sport. So yeah, it started there. And then, you know, I was

no longer allowed to play with boys and jumped into the weird and wonderful sport of triathlon.

[00:02:12] **Stephen Calabria:** Okay. And why triathlons specifically though? What does the whole process evoke in you that say bicycling or archery doesn't?

[00:02:21] **Lesley Paterson:** Right. So, you know, triathlon is really curious, right? It's swimming, biking and running. And I think that through those three different sports, the way that your body moves gives me this kinesthetic pleasure.

[00:02:34] I'm a dancer. I was a dancer and have done that for a long time. So my expression of self comes through movement and the movement is so unique in each sport that it's, I don't know, it just kind of, like I, I loved it. I, I still do. And my dad was into triathlon and thought it would be fun for me to give it a go.

[00:02:56] And I jumped into a local team. I think so many reasons why you get into something is, you know, what are your parents do? What are the facilities like where you live? And we had a great club that was just a big community center.

[00:03:07] And, yeah, so I kind of dived in that and was pretty good, pretty quick. And so that just propelled the whole vision of where I wanted to go with it.

[00:03:15] **Stephen Calabria:** There's a story you've told about competing in your first XTERRA race in 2008 in Temecula, California, where you were in the lead, but you bonked. Could you explain what bonking is and what it feels like and what ultimately happened there?

[00:03:31] **Lesley Paterson:** Absolutely. So, well, let's go back to that first question. XTERRA is a form of triathlon. So just like in running, for instance, you have lots of different disciplines. You have the 10k, the 5k, the marathon. It's the same in triathlon.

[00:03:43] So triathlon is swimming, biking and running. But there's many different events, right? There's Olympic distance that's in the Olympics. There's Ironman, which is a super long one. And XTERRA is a different type of triathlon. It's all off road. So we swim, that might be in a lake, it might be in an ocean. We mountain bike on trails, so we use a specific type of bike and everything's on trails, and then we run on the trails, as well.

[00:04:07] So, and the distances for Xterra are generally about a mile swim, about 40 kilometers on the bike and about 10Ks of running, but of course on trails, so up and down and here and there, sometimes obstacles. So it's a, it's a unique, form of the sport. The first one I did in Temecula, which was a wonderful experience, Temecula is in California near San Diego.

[00:04:28] It can get very hot in the summer because it's slightly inland. And I think it was about 100 degrees. That's about, you know, I don't know, 30, it was about 35 to 40 degrees Celsius. And I was out in the race, I wasn't prepared for what this event was like, I'd never done it before. And the events I had done were a lot shorter and a lot less intense.

[00:04:46] So I didn't have the right nutrition on board. So bonking basically means when you're, your body lacks glycogen to fuel you or indeed it could be electrolytes or fluid. So maybe you're dehydrated. So it was definitely, definitely a combination of those that meant I promptly walked on the run.

[00:05:05] **Stephen Calabria:** And basically tapped out, like, physically.

[00:05:08] **Lesley Paterson:** Yes. I didn't, I still managed to finish the race, but yeah, you're, you're, you're done.

[00:05:12] **Stephen Calabria:** Right. And a few years later, in 2011, you won the first of your five world championship triathlons. As you approached and then cross the finish line, what does that feel like?

[00:05:24] **Lesley Paterson:** Yeah, you know, it's just a very surreal feeling when you've spent your whole life dreaming about something like this and then it happens. And how it happened was a big life lesson, insomuch as I had a great swim, I came onto the bike and I had a flat tire on the bike.

[00:05:39] So I had a mechanical and I had to fix it. And I think it was in those moments that I really said to myself, do I have what it takes? And, is this worth it? Like I really had the Doubting Thomases, you know?

[00:05:51] Like, oh, you know, woe is me and this and that. And then I just kind of went, went after it. I just kind of committed to the moment and said, I'm just going to go as hard as I can and see where it ends me up and I won the bloody race. So, you know, there you go.

[00:06:04] **Stephen Calabria:** That's a testament to sticking with it. What was your trajectory in triathlons from there?

[00:06:11] **Lesley Paterson:** Yeah. So, you know, obviously I gained quite a few endorsements or sponsorships from that point. I was running a coaching business. I still do, where I coach other athletes and that at the time was helping to support my professional career, as an athlete.

[00:06:25] And so that, that expanded, And then it was a case of, you know, can you repeat? That's always a big question, right? It's always a difficult thing. And that was quite a journey.

[00:06:33] And so, I kind of went back to the table and said what I need to do to repeat and I really sort of dug into myself and luckily my husband's a sports psychologist by training, so we worked together on some of the mental aspects which is almost more key, in this specific instance.

[00:06:48] So, yeah, after that point it was just about sort of trying to be the best in the world and continue to be that way.

[00:06:53] **Stephen Calabria:** As opposed, I mean, it's not like one was enough to prove it.

[00:06:57] **Lesley Paterson:** It's never enough because to get to the, to get to that level, you have such drive in you. And so when you feel it and you feel a success, you always want more.

[00:07:04] And for me, it's always been about process. It's not been about outcome. So while of course you dream about winning a world title or whatever that might be. Once you have focused on the process, the mastery of the craft, making yourself as good as possible, that's what's addictive because when it pays off, you're like, Oh my God, I have this formula and I want to keep tweaking it and getting better and pushing myself to the limits.

[00:07:26] **Stephen Calabria:** Well, it's like, didn't Paul McCartney say something about you work so hard to reach the top of the mountain and then once you get there, you realize there's nothing there?

[00:07:34] **Lesley Paterson:** Yeah, gosh, I don't know that it's nothing there. I think it's that maybe your reasons for wanting that change. And you have to recalibrate yourself.

[00:07:43] So I think just, you know, pushing to the limits. And that can mean mentally, it can mean physically. Coping with any obstacle and giving back in

some way. Of course, I was coaching. So the things that I was learning, I was passing on to others. So just all of that, I think.

[00:07:59] **Stephen Calabria:** Before we move on from focusing exclusively on triathlons, in terms of learning experiences. From which experiences in racing would you say you think you learned the most and what were the lessons you took from them?

[00:08:12] **Lesley Paterson:** So for me specifically, I think I was diagnosed with Lyme's disease shortly after winning the world title. And so I think, you know, my health kind of fell apart in 2013, the end of and then into 2014, I had to have a break and I learned a lot about myself and what sport means to me and what its function is in my life.

[00:08:31] So I think that, that, that was a, a huge, a huge piece of it. That was the biggest learning curve for me.

[00:08:37] **Stephen Calabria:** For a while there you gave up triathlons.

[00:08:39] **Lesley Paterson:** I didn't give it up. I, I was always anticipating coming back, but I had to take a break insomuch as my body couldn't handle it.

[00:08:45] I was trying to look to all different types, types of therapies to get me back in, you know, back in shape.

[00:08:51] **Stephen Calabria:** A big part of resilience that we discuss on this show is cognitive and emotional flexibility, allowing our brains and emotions to bend with the wind, but not break. Are there any strategies you used as a triathlete enable you to roll with the challenges that you face on the trail?

[00:09:12] **Lesley Paterson:** Yeah, a bunch. Strategies of resiliency, I think one of the biggest key things I was learning through my husband, you know, from a neuroscience perspective, how the brain works, why we have thoughts and feelings that we don't like, the interaction of the different parts of our brain and how that manifests itself.

[00:09:29] And then probably most importantly, the part of your brain that processes physical and emotional pain and how that actually can get physically more dense as you cope with more adversity.

[00:09:40] And so for me, that was a really key thing because all of a sudden it was you welcome the adversity because you see it as a workout, and you're

excited to make yourself stronger as a consequence and be able to cope with more. And the impact of that made me feel like any bad day was actually a good day. So it was like just reframing.

[00:10:01] **Stephen Calabria:** So, while all this was going on, you were also nurturing a love of film and screenwriting. What prompted this love, and where did you initially take it?

[00:10:11] **Lesley Paterson:** Sure. So, I mean, I've, as I mentioned earlier, I was a dancer from a young age as well, so my expression of creativity was always there. So, I always had these two strands of my life, and I actually ended up studying drama and English in my undergraduate at the tender age of 17 and kind of parlayed that into doing some film work.

[00:10:31] And then my husband got a job out here in California and I went back and studied a Master's in film and theater at San Diego State University. And would come back and forth to LA. I would produce, I would act in things, you know, I mean, I just loved the world, right? I love film, I love storytelling.

[00:10:46] **Stephen Calabria:** You were even in a music video.

[00:10:48] **Lesley Paterson:** I was even in a music video, I know, I know. So, anyways, I mean, that love has always kind of been there and I just fostered it and built on it as the years went through. But obviously being a professional world champion, that was where my focus was, and on the side I was cultivating this other career. and

[00:11:05] **Stephen Calabria:** A few years later, you co wrote the screenplay for All Quiet on the Western Front, which meant you also had to buy the rights to do it. Why did that story resonate with you so much, and what were the initial tribulations you and your husband had to endure in the fight to get it made?

[00:11:23] **Lesley Paterson:** So, you know, we got the rights to the novel way, way back. I was working with another writing, producing partner at the time, Ian Stokel. And, yeah, he was really key in, in getting the option to the novel, but we both loved it. We both read it at school and we happened to pick up the novel.

[00:11:38] There was a sale on at a local bookstore and we're both big, you know, he was in the military himself. I've always loved war films 'cause they're such a intense environment to investigate character. And obviously, it's one of the biggest titles in the world. So from a business perspective, you're always

thinking as an outsider to the industry, how can you have something above everyone else?

[00:11:59] So that's when we just approached the estate of the author. And we thought, well, why not? And we pitched them, and we got it, and off we were.

[00:12:08] **Stephen Calabria:** What goes into making a film like that? Like, what are the I mean, you're rolling your eyes like

[00:12:13] **Lesley Paterson:** Yeah, that's a loaded question. Yeah. So, certainly when you get the option to material, you've then got to adapt it. If you're a writer, of course.

[00:12:21] If you're just a producer, you're getting writers on board. So it took us a good couple of years to adapt the material to a place where we felt we could get it out in the marketplace and try and put things together, whether that's getting a bigger producer on board that can run with it, whether it's getting finance, whether it's what we call packaging a film, so that means getting a director on board.

[00:12:40] Getting cast on board. So we were learning as we went as well, uh, in terms of the industry. And of course the marketplace changed a lot across the 16 years that it took to get made.

[00:12:50] So those, you know, along those 16 years, many different things happened, we had to continue to option the material along the way, which took a lot of money and a lot of risk. So it really was a challenging journey.

[00:13:01] **Stephen Calabria:** Then comes March 28th, 2015. Could you tell us the circumstances around that day and what happened afterwards?

[00:13:10] **Lesley Paterson:** Yeah, so as I mentioned earlier, optioning the material costs money and for us it was about 10, 000 a year, which when you don't have much is a lot. That was challenging to come up with that money all the time.

[00:13:20] We begged, we borrowed, we stealed, we used up all our savings, we used credit cards. And this specific year, we didn't have the money. So we were going to lose it. And I'd used my race earnings on a myriad of occasions, to fund this pursuit. And so I decided I'd go out to Costa Rica and do a race, to earn enough money to pay this option.

[00:13:38] However, the day before the race, I came off my bike, I fell off it and I broke my shoulder. And, it was a big, big decisive moment. And, you talk about flexibility. I just kind of figured out a way to do it. I ended up swimming. With one arm, I came out of the water about 12 minutes down and biked up into second and ran into first.

[00:13:56] So it was a case of how can I achieve the end result in a way that is maybe different or more flexible than your traditional way.

[00:14:05] **Stephen Calabria:** And your husband is in sports medicine. So it's not like you were doing this all in a vacuum. You had somebody there who was-

[00:14:11] **Lesley Paterson:** I had the best team in the world. You know, I took a lot of advice before I did this. I'm very close to a lot of top physical therapists. And I know my body incredibly well. Is this gonna cause detrimental damage? Long term or not? And the position or where it hurt as long as I kept it stable. You know, and I, I could stop at any time, so.

[00:14:32] **Stephen Calabria:** So, running and winning a triathlon with a broken shoulder. The folks in the writer's room, again, are shaking their heads. This is totally ludicrous and implausible. So, you won the race and the prize money, and you bought the rights to All Quiet in 2006, but it was only around 15 years later that you finally got it made.

[00:14:53] In terms of resilience, sticking with it, refusing to give up, seeing it through to the end, what were the strategies, would you say, that you employed that most helped you persevere, especially insofar as they related to your triathlon running?

[00:15:07] **Lesley Paterson:** Sure. I think the, the biggest thing that's gonna keep you going through all the ups and downs is your why. Why are you doing it? Why is it important?

[00:15:15] And for me, there was two reasons. One is, it's such an important story to tell, and we felt we had the right adaptation. We felt we had the right take to it.

[00:15:24] And the second piece is, this was our chance to break into the industry. And it gave us a calling card that, along the way, regardless of any outcome, we were learning, we were meeting people as a consequence of having this option.

[00:15:38] So even if it hadn't gotten made, we'd already made amazing connections because we had the option. So, it was finding a positive in the process rather than focusing on the outcome

[00:15:50] **Stephen Calabria:** To that point about meeting people along the way and learning so much, a pillar of resilience is social support, the feeling that we're not completely alone, that someone out there has our back.

[00:16:02] You've touched on it, but who are the folks that you would say have comprised your network of support and what was it that they most offered?

[00:16:11] **Lesley Paterson:** You know, it was definitely my husband, of course, and the journey we were prepared to go on. And then Ian and his positive attitude. And then it was, friends and family that support you as people, not just for the outcome, but who you are.

[00:16:26] And it wasn't always easy and there wasn't always a support. But I think through sport, I made a lot of connections in the industry that became mentors. And the reason that that was impactful, and I really implore people to do this, is look how you can create your community. And sport is a wonderful way to do it because, you're vulnerable when you're in pain.

[00:16:46] You know, whether that's a running club, a biking club, whatever that is, and you bond in ways that are authentic. Because this industry is tough to create authentic relationships, so any which way that you can do that, then it's, it can be really impactful, and focusing less on what can you do for me, it's more about like, how can I help you?

[00:17:07] How can we go on this journey of a friendship together? I've got something to offer you, and then in return, you know, chances are any, like any friendship, right, there's give and take. So, yeah, I would say that that was the best support..

[00:17:20] **Stephen Calabria:** Another aspect of resilience that we cover a lot is facing fear, meeting these things head-on, meeting challenges head on, even if we are terrified in the moment. Now, you seem to have almost a supernatural Ability to do this.

[00:17:38] Have you felt the fear in each one of these things that you have jumped into and what is your strategy on overcoming this thing that tells you to turn back and seek safety?

[00:17:51] **Lesley Paterson:** Yeah, I feel the fear every minute of every day. And I think I've, I've, I think maybe I've been born with it. I don't know if it's a Calvinistic Scottishism in me. There's something I can understand that through suffering, through facing that fear, you're going to learn and grow and be better as a consequence.

[00:18:13] And for me, that just gives a lot of depth to my life. I intuitively knew that that was a case from a young age, right? I mean, seven years old, looking at a bunch of boys mucking around, playing rugby, and saying, I want to do that. Not just because it was rugby, but because it was a challenge. So anything that's a challenge, I'm drawn towards.

[00:18:33] And I think my brain just knew that that was gonna progress me. I seek it out, I seek out the hard things. I don't always like them, I don't, I'm certainly not always successful at them, and I think it's been okay with that, right?

[00:18:49] It's like the experience of life is far more powerful if you, you can lean into things not working out, failure as a way to just learn and grow. You know, it's like there's a quality about it that's, yeah, it just makes you feel, I guess. It makes you feel.

[00:19:06] **Stephen Calabria:** Right. The feeling as though you are not the same person that you used to be because of all of these challenges that you met head on and that you managed to overcome. Not necessarily by yourself, but with this community that you talked about.

[00:19:19] What scares you?

[00:19:22] **Lesley Paterson:** Oh gosh. Probably losing control. That scares me the most. Because, you know, that's what you do to try and find success is you mitigate risk or you try and control things or you find your own pattern through it all.

[00:19:40] And so my biggest fear is to not have a pattern and to not see it and to not get it. So that's when I get most frustrated is when there's a puzzle I cannot crack. And I can't see the way through. Yeah, I mean, I'm getting comfortable with that insomuch as, yeah, being, being okay with not being in control, I suppose.

[00:20:00] **Stephen Calabria:** Right, I mean, you've picked two areas, screenwriting and triathlon running and coaching, you have, to an extent, a great

degree of control over the outcome of both of those things because you were the only one sitting, well, you and your writing partner, were the only ones sitting in the writer's chair.

[00:20:17] You are the only one running a triathlon. And so in other situations, I can imagine. Yeah, being faced with the uncertainty of the world, it must be difficult to step out into the real world because they're not like these two areas that you've chosen.

[00:20:34] **Lesley Paterson:** Big time. And I think that this is where I struggle the most, because I really, when you have an entrepreneurial spirit, you see the world in a different way, and you're constantly up against people that don't. That have been confined to a system.

[00:20:48] And it, you know, plenty of people are happy in that system, and that's amazing, and I support everyone's own journey. That's not me, and I think, you know, when you're facing unimaginable odds, whether it's in business, in relationships, in health, you know, you have to push and see outside what has been done before if you're gonna make breakthroughs.

[00:21:11] So, as uncomfortable as it is and as challenging as it is, it's like, oh my gosh, that's, I mean, I've done it. I've done it in film, I've done it, you know, everybody told us we couldn't do it.

[00:21:21] Everybody said no. Like, there's so many just devastatingly intense, awful moments throughout both of these journeys thus far that, I guess, have prepared me for almost anything, I would like to think.

[00:21:34] **Stephen Calabria:** It toughens you up, it gives you the scar tissue.

[00:21:36] **Lesley Paterson:** Gosh, and we know it, you know, physiologically, right? It toughens up your brain, it changes your brain chemistry, you know, neuroplasticity. It's a thing, it's not some woo woo.

[00:21:44] **Stephen Calabria:** Yes, yes, of course. Last question, and it relates to something you touched upon earlier, the finding your why.

[00:21:52] We talk all the time on this show about meaning and purpose, the feeling that our efforts matter for something greater than ourselves, that they don't take place in a vacuum and actually are endowed with meaning.

[00:22:05] After everything you've been through with professional athletics and professional film, how would you say your meaning and purpose has evolved from when you started to now?

[00:22:14] **Lesley Paterson:** Gosh a lot. I think it's become less self centered and more, you know, more about giving back or more about, how can my journey inspire others or, you know, what information have I learned that I can pass on?

[00:22:28] And at the same time, pushing my own dreams and having even bigger goals, where my impact can be greater. You know, and there's no better forum and filmmaking and storytelling to have an impact, especially in this day and age.

[00:22:42] You know, we want our films to really say something important and and make change.

[00:22:47] **Stephen Calabria:** What did All Quiet really say that you thought was important to say?

[00:22:52] **Lesley Paterson:** I think it was about for me specifically. The betrayal of a youthful generation and the manipulation by the upper brass. And then secondly, what happens if you crush your enemies?

[00:23:06] What are the consequences of actions? And we see that in history. I feel that's really critical and I really believe that Ed, our director, just captured that so beautifully. Yeah, it's an absolute honor that he did really, you know, feels so lucky.

[00:23:22] **Stephen Calabria:** Well, good thing we're in an era now where there's no negativity at all and, uh, everyone is just living so happy and carefree, right?

[00:23:29] **Lesley Paterson:** That's right.

[00:23:29] **Stephen Calabria:** Well, that's it for my questions. Was there anything else you wanted to say?

[00:23:32] **Lesley Paterson:** No, that was great. Thank you so much for having me on.

[00:23:34] **Stephen Calabria:** Thank you for coming.

[00:23:36] Lesley Paterson is a triathlete, screenwriter, and something of a superhero. That's all for this episode of Road to Resilience. If you enjoyed it, please rate, review, and subscribe to our podcast on your favorite podcast platform.

[00:23:49] Road to Resilience is a production of the Mount Sinai Health System. It's produced by me, Stephen Calabria, and our executive producer, Lucia Lee. From all of us here at Mount Sinai, thanks for listening, and we'll catch you next time.