Head above water: how Paralympic swimmer Teresa Perales turns trials into triumphs

Within five years of losing the use of her legs at age 19, Teresa Perales was competing in the Paralympics. Here she shares her secrets for staying afloat.

December 11, 2020 | Updated February 12, 2025

"In Zaragoza, Spain, there was a sports center for children with an unorthodox method for

©IESE Business School

identifying promising swimmers. They threw you in the water, and if you floated, you were worth training; if not, you weren't. I didn't float, so they told my parents that swimming wasn't for me."

Four decades later, Teresa Perales has accumulated a record 28 medals for swimming at the Paralympic Games, and many more in World Cups and European championships. How did a girl with no apparent talent become a champion?

Perales credits two defining moments in her teenage years. The first was the death of her father when she was 15. "It was a very hard time, but it made me realize that it's not worth having regrets," she recalls. Four years later, she was diagnosed with neuropathy and lost the use of her legs, which left her in a wheelchair. "I had to learn to do many things again," she says. Among them, learning to swim. The first week, she had to wear a life jacket, but within a year, she was achieving her first swimming victories.

Although this period in her life was one of great uncertainty, she can now see how it benefited her. "I learned so much in those times. A person who falls and gets up again has many more tools than someone who has never fallen. I think that gives me an advantage."

She doesn't see the two events that defined her life as failures or tragedies; rather, they were opportunities to learn, gain experience and figure out what she needed to change. In this, her learning curve can be likened to that of an entrepreneur who suffers an unexpected setback or whose first try at starting a business hasn't worked out.

Perales remembers the day she got up in the morning and simply forgot to look at her feet as "the beginning of a new stage in my life, of realizing that I would never walk again and that, from then on, I would do things differently. Perhaps the process would be uncomfortable and more difficult, but I was not going to do things badly because of that."

Armed with this new outlook on life, Perales has driven in a rally, swum with sharks, traveled the world and been a member of parliament in Aragon, the region of Spain where she is from. The key has been to change her mindset and to stop looking for excuses. "Complaining gets you nowhere; you need to act. It's important to have challenges and to remember that something terrible may be followed by something wonderful. Experience has taught me that this is often the case."

©IESE Business School

Discover your potential

"You're a diamond in the rough that we have to polish," Perales's first swimming coach told her. The phrase has had a profound impact on her, professionally and personally. "At the time, I didn't realize the scope of such a comment, but it left a powerful mark," she recalls.

Over time, the swimmer has come to believe that her coach didn't see anything special in her, and that he said the same to all his students. Yet it served as inspiration, a self-fulfilling prophecy that drove her forward. "Now I say the same thing to managers when I give talks and conferences," she admits. "It's the best thing anyone can say to you, especially when you believe it."

Reaching the top as an athlete isn't just a question of motivation, of course. Perales swims between three and six hours a day, and in the past, even more. But in sports, as in many other areas of life, training hard is no guarantee of success. "You risk everything in a few seconds." In her case, 35.88 seconds: the time of her world record-setting 50-meter freestyle at the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing.

She recommends not focusing on results but enjoying the process and even the uncertainty generated around the launch of any new venture, with peace of mind. "Deep down, the uncertainty is good. It makes you appreciate what's really important," she says. Although naturally, she always goes out "wanting to win."

Just do it

To be able to live with uncertainty and channel it into positive actions, Perales is committed to working hard on emotional management, insisting it's one of the keys to success. "I've struggled for years to stop thinking when I get on the pool bench." She finds that if she thinks about it too much, she doesn't win. "I distract myself, and the focus doesn't go where it needs to be: on swimming fast." She has also learned to value the journey: "I find it makes me enjoy the decisive moment even more."

Knowing her strengths and weaknesses is another key. There's nothing better than thoroughly knowing yourself for helping you get into the flow, so you can act without overthinking, she says.

De-escalating and not overly dramatizing the situation is another trick. To manage your fears better, remove their teeth, she says. "Fear is wonderful and necessary, because it keeps you

©IESE Business School

alert, but you have to manage it so it doesn't leave you blocked. I make a point of laughing at fear or laughing at myself."

Work against the odds

Fear and uncertainty were constant for many during 2020, with a global pandemic bringing human activity around the world to a halt. "People began working from home and children switched to classes online, but for athletes it is impossible to swim or play tennis online," Perales said in a media interview. She dealt with the stay-at-home orders by improvising a gym at home where she could train every day, using sports equipment that simulated her movements in the pool.

During the first three-month national lockdown in Spain, she set herself three goals: first, establish a routine; second, prioritize activities that felt good and safe; and third, make plans for the future, to remind yourself that there would be an end point. And she committed herself to positive thinking. The lockdown wasn't all bad, she says: "I spent more time with my husband and son, and I'll treasure that."

But the main lesson she draws from the year in which she spent the least amount of time in the water is: Never take anything for granted, because it can disappear in an instant. "I had already learned that lesson," she acknowledged. "But now it has been reinforced. You always learn a little more."

Looking to the future

Perales has competed in all the Paralympic Games held this century: in Sydney 2000, Athens 2004, Beijing 2008, London 2012, Rio de Janeiro 2016, Tokyo 2020 (which took place in 2021 after being postponed due to the pandemic) and Paris 2024. "Continuing to dream of future Paralympic Games is essential to my plans."

In Paris, Perales accomplished her goal to equal the 28 medals of the U.S. swimming champion, Michael Phelps, when she took a bronze in Women's 50m Backstroke S2. And unlike Perales, Phelps has retired from competition.

She now has her eyes set on the Los Angeles Games in 2028, where she hopes to win her 29th medal, which would mean she surpasses Phelps' record 28 Olympic medal count.

She will be over 50 years old, competing among increasingly younger rivals. But that is not something that worries her. "I have always used my mental capacity above all else." It's

©IESE Business School

appropriate that when she addressed the 2025 International Women's Entrepreneurial Challenge (IWEC) Annual Conference held at IESE Barcelona, the title of her session was "The Power of Attitude."

Competing when thrown in at the deep end

Ready

- Look for a mentor who helps you believe in yourself
- Practice, practice and practice
- Don't hide behind excuses

Set

- See the value in uncertainty: It helps you appreciate the good things
- Know your strengths and weaknesses
- Learn to laugh at yourself and your fears

Go!

- When the moment of truth comes, stop thinking and act
- Enjoy the process, not just the final result
- Believe that it will all work out

Article by Tomas Crespo, based on an interview and appearances Perales has made at a number of IESE events organized by professor Santiago Alvarez de Mon.

A version of this article is published in IESE Business School Insight magazine #157. It was updated to reflect Perales's participation in the Paris 2024 Summer Paralympic Games and her attendance at the IWEC Annual Conference held at IESE Barcelona in 2025.

www.iese.edu/insight

©IESE Business School