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Don: At the University of Michigan, you were part of the crew team. What led you to that sport?

Rob: I had a couple of friends actually that were on the women's team, which was a varsity sport though the men's team was still a club, even though they rowed in all the same races. We rowed against some of the marquee teams in the sport: Harvard, Princeton, and Wisconsin. Crew was a scholarship sport for those universities. It was the beginning of the school year, and Michigan's team needed people who were fit, strong, and preferably tall. They asked me to come try out. The first thing they do is take a look at us and put us on ergometer to see if we can actually master the movements quickly. Once I did that, then I took a fitness test, and they told me, *"You're in if you want to be."* So that was the beginning of it in the fall of 1989.

Don: When rowing, if the entire team isn't in sync, the boat doesn't move efficiently. What did you learn about communication through the sport?

Rob: One thing I learned early on from my coach was, *"Don't talk in the boat, because if you have the energy to talk, then something's wrong."* He was serious about it. I thought he was a little bit facetiousness, but he wasn't kidding at all. There should never be any talking in the boat because all of your energy should be into your legs and into your oars. The coxswain is the only person that's talking. It's the coxswain that determines how many strokes you need to row a minute, what the pace needs to be, when you need to pick it up, and when you need to get into crews. That's their job.

Your job is to basically pull as hard as you can for the 2000 meters. That's the one thing I remember about Juan, when he was coaching us, that the most important thing is to give it your all. That took a lot of mental capacity too, because crew is very painful when you're giving it your all, even though you're saying, *"It's only 2000 meters, it can't be that bad."* No, it can be that bad. You're gasping for your breath. That's where the mental part comes over. You have all that training, but you have to be mentally tough to tell yourself that you can do it, you can get through it, and you want to get through it for your teammates because they don't look like they're suffering, and you don't want to be the guy that checks out and causes the boat to lose. So, that was the one moment for me from Coach Juan that I still remember to this day.

Don: During your athletic career, were you influenced by someone on your sports journey, whether a coach or a parent, that you still think about all these years later?

Rob: My coach of our little league team, Mr. Dunlap. He was a great guy. I was really young for my grade in school. I had a November birthday, but I was not redshirted the way many kids would be today. I went to college when I was 17. Most of the time, you'd probably be 18. So, I was always one of the younger kids. My physical development was lagging behind some of the other boys. And it wasn't until I got older and had kids, who had fall birthdays, that it really dawned on me— that's what hindered some of my early athletic career issues in elementary school or in junior high until I got my growth spurt. I was just later in the year than most of the other kids, and I just never put that together.

Looking back on that, Mr. Dunlap, he always gave us the chance to play and I remember him working with me on hitting because I had some trouble learning to hit early on. He wasn't about the best players on the team, he was about making sure that everybody could play better. Looking back on it, that's how I coach my kids' teams and have for many years.

Don: It has been nearly 30 years since you last raced at Michigan. For most people, that competitive nature does not go away. How do you express your competitive fire today?

Rob: Some days I express it more productively than other days. But, when I heard you speak, and you talked about the greatest athletes, and how they hate losing more than they love winning— I don't want to, in an idealistic way, associate myself with that— but in a real way, I do. I hate losing more than I love winning. I really do. I haven't had the athletic prowess and mental discipline combined to be a Michael Jordan, but I definitely don't like to lose.

I like to think that in the best moments, when you lose, you need to find out, *“What did I do? What did we do wrong in that proposal? Where were we off the mark? The next time we need to correct that because making excuses, this doesn't get you anywhere. We are going to lose.”*

I mean, look, you make the Hall of Fame, and bat at 30%, right? I joke about that all the time.

“Hey, you could be in the Hall of Fame. A couple other things you do well, but you're hitting 300, 320, you're in man.”

Well, if I get it right 30% in my industry, that's considered a pretty good win rate. So, it's really important to be honest with yourself about what you did wrong and where did you go amiss. If you can't do that, then you're not going to get to whatever that successful metric is for your business. You're not going to get there unless you can learn from those failures and resist the temptation. It's easy to make excuses, but I also think those are team efforts, especially in our business, with a type of complex information, technology, solutions, and proposals that we have to put together, supporting the public sector business that we do. It can be very complicated. You have a lot of people that are involved and rarely, does it fall to one person. *“Oh, it's your fault because your architecture was off.”* That's not fair. Too many people have input and there are too many components in most cases. So, it's more about a process, the decisions that go into that, and the information that you're assimilating to try and formulate that solution. If you have any of those wrong, it could throw off your proposal, and you could lose. There's a number of factors you have to try to identify. It is just like in sports, there is no “I” in team. If you make it that way, then you're not going to get very far.

Don: In both sports and business, many of us are motivated by goals we set for ourselves. How did goal setting in your time in competitive sports affect the way you set goals today at ViON?

Rob: I think about incremental progress a lot, rather than *"We have our goals for the year."* That can be a really amorphous achievement if you don't break it down into smaller components. I got a little bit of that from my grandfather who would always tell me to shift from: *"I'm going to take 15 seconds off my time over a long period of time,"* to *"I'm going to take three seconds or five seconds off my time this month.. then I will take another five."* 15 seconds could be a big chunk, especially if you're rolling at your capacity at a high level and you're not dogging it, but you can measure yourself on that incremental improvement to get to the larger goal.

In business, it's the same thing. I think you need to have incremental goals and you need to have an understanding of what helps you or hinders you from achieving those incremental goals. Again, that's not sexy or interesting, but you have to write a number of statements of work in order to achieve the volume of business that you'd like.

Don: In sports, external events or rivalries motivate the team. In business, what motivates you?

Rob: In business, there are absolutely companies that you see again and again, and you want to beat. You want to win that deal, you want to win that program, and it's a very similar feeling as a college rival for me. That rivalry is very similar and that desire to win, and I guess more importantly, the desire not to lose. When I think about going up against those companies, my first thought is *"I don't want to lose."* So yes, there are absolutely rivalries in business just like there are in college and the rest of life.