

**Episode 48: Takeshi**

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*This transcript is non-verbatim.*

**F:**

***What does it mean to be the child of a Japanese father and a Salvadoran mother? In this episode, Takeshi shares his stories of growing up in El Salvador during the Civil War and his journey to becoming an Olympic athlete who embraces both flags of his parents' home countries.***

***I'm Fumi, this is #OUR\_racism, and this is the story of Takeshi.***

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**T:**

I grew up in El Salvador. My mom is Salvadoran, and my dad is Japanese. So I grew up in this world where my dad was always concerned about studying and having good grades at school. And then, my mother being very lighthearted and she was more interested in us having fun, and that we would enjoy ourselves. And much of that situation was coming from our background and where we were growing [up]. In El Salvador at that time, we were facing the Civil War, so things were not so easy. And the situation around us was pretty tense. We could hear bombs explode, [saw] people dead lying in the streets as we went from school to our home... we could see these type of things. So we were growing [up] in this very tense situation in that sense.

So my mom... well, being Latina, she was always very lovely, loving to us. She would hug us, she would kiss us, she would say, "I love you." And on the other hand, my Japanese dad would never say something like that, would never say, "I love you," would never hug us. So I grew up thinking, "Why is my dad that way?", right? It wasn't until I grew up and later on traveled to Japan that I started understanding these differences between my parents. And it always struck me that they were so different in many ways.

And I could see the culture now [today], my dad wanting for us to be the best we could. And the way he tried for us to try harder was to tell us that whatever we were accomplishing wasn't enough, or was not on par with world standards. I remember in school, when we showed him our test and we would get an A for example, he would say, "Oh, that's normal," or, "Probably, that's not much in another country. Probably, an A in El Salvador is a C in Japan," he would say. So we were always trying to prove our best. But it was hard, because the best we showed was never enough in that sense. On the other hand, when we showed this type of results to our mom, to our Salvadorean mom, she was happy even with a B. So we had this ambivalence at home. And we already knew these differences. So yes, it was very interesting as we were growing up trying to understand all these differences we could see in Japanese culture and Latin-American culture.

And growing up as well, a big part of what I became, it's a sportsman. When I was young, I started practicing soccer, and I was able to play in the National Junior League in El Salvador. It was pretty fun. Trainings with group teams like soccer, it's always fun. So I practiced soccer since I was in middle school, up to high school. And during this time, I had the opportunity to compete in a track and field championship that my P.E. teacher invited us to go to. And I did pretty well in that competition. So I was invited to train for track and field. But trainings were so hard in track and field compared to whatever we did in soccer. Soccer was all fun, and track and field was all about pain. Running, throwing up, getting dizzy, lying on the ground, trying to catch my breath... It was such a different environment

doing soccer and track and field. And at that time, I thought, "Why would I change to track and field if I'm having so much fun doing soccer?"

But as I was competing in track and field, I qualified for the World Junior Championships that was going to be held in Italy at that time. So I was very motivated because of this opportunity I received doing track. I thought, "Wow. It [track and field] is very demanding. It is so gruesome. It is hard. But I made it to the World Junior Championships. So I better continue doing this." Don't get me wrong, I had a lot of fun doing track. But it was painful. It's a painful sport. For those who have practiced track and field, [they] know [how painful track and field is].

So finally, I decided to go all in, in track and field. And well, this is the story where I compare my dad's and my mom's standards... [So] while I was in high school, I won the high school championships in San Salvador. And I told my dad about it. And he said, "You should study more than do sports."

Just to put this into perspective, I always thought my dad would approve of me being an athlete because he himself came to El Salvador to teach judo. So he graduated from Kokushikan University in sports. And my mother, [she is] also a physical education teacher here in El Salvador. I thought they would be interested in me pursuing something as an athlete. And [yet] they both thought I should study. [They told] my brothers and I that we should pursue a career in business or in something else rather than sports. They said sports was a very hard thing to do, and it was probably easier to study.

Growing up, for me, it was so... it was such a weird idea for me to think that it was easier to study than just follow a path in sports, because I think the stereotype is that athletes are not good at studying, they're just good at sports. And for many athletes, probably, following a business career *and* sports wasn't ideal. It was either or. [Or so] it seemed. So when I presented my medal to my dad, that I had gotten first place in high school championships, he told me, "Oh, that's not enough. Probably if you win the National Senior championships, that would probably be something good that you could decide you should be an athlete. In the meantime, you should study more."

So I went down studying [hard] as I always tried to, but also [put] my best effort in sports. And finally, I got the gold medal at the National Championships, senior national championships. And I presented it to my dad. And he said the same thing again, "Oh, that's probably not enough. You should at least win the Central American championships," which was a bigger regional geographical accomplishment, right? "Until then, you should think of studying more than doing sports," he said.

I went on to be able to get the gold medal and the Central American junior championships and then I said, "Dad, I got it [the medal]!" And he said the same thing again, "That's not enough. Maybe if you compete at the Olympics, then probably you should pursue a sports career." Well, thankfully, and gladly, that same year, I was chosen as the team member for Athens Olympics in 2004. And until then, my dad said, "Okay, you can continue doing track and field but you should still go ahead and get a career in business in parallel with your track and field endeavor." So thankfully, I got a scholarship to go to Inter-American University in Puerto Rico. And then I went on to get a master's degree at the University of Texas in Arlington, which I did, pursuing track and field [simultaneously], and graduated in business administration. So it was pretty fun.

So after this time, I wanted to learn more of Japan. I, now was a grown up, but I thought I was more interested in learning about the Japanese culture and getting immersed in the language. So I thought I wanted to go to Japan. And so I did after my MBA. And during this time, I moved to Japan, I was able to meet many athletes, very good friends of mine, some Olympians as well from the Japanese team. And I had the opportunity to participate in a sprint's camp at that time, and I was able to become part of the Japanese team.

At that moment, I thought I had accomplished my mom's dream of being representing El Salvador in the Olympics. And after I moved to Japan, I thought it would be great if I could also be able to represent my father's country in an international competition. And everything connected. All the dots were there for me to be able to represent Japan and do it while I was living in Japan and I was studying Japanese. And so I did. It had been many years of preparation that brought me to that point and at that point, it was in 2017, I was able to represent Team Japan at the World Relay Championships in the Bahamas. So it was really a dream come true for me and my family to be able to wave the Japanese flag and do it with the Japanese national team.

**F:**

***Takeshi shares his experiences of growing up in El Salvador as one of the few half-Japanese children in his community.***

**T:**

Well, it was pretty fun, in a way, growing up in El Salvador. When kids would ask my name, I always said my Japanese name. So I would always say, "Takeshi." It was interesting because my kindergarten friends got used to it from the beginning. So they always called me by my Japanese name. And I guess since growing up from little kids, it was easy for them to adapt and to learn my Japanese name.

But growing up, people who didn't know me, for example, around in El Salvador, there were occasions where they would call me "Chino," which means Chinese. And me and my brothers knew these nicknames, right? In Latin America, it's very common for Latinos to call Asians "Chinos" whether you're Japanese, Korean, Thai... they can call you "Chino", and that's their general way of referring to a nation, right? Of course, times have changed and people are a little bit more careful in some situations, but in Latin America, it's very common to hear this type of nicknames being called.

I remember my mother addressing some of these situations and telling us growing up, "You should laugh it out. You should not pay attention to that." And many times, it was said in a bad way that we were being called, but also as a friendly nickname by some of our friends. They will call us this. So I guess it's part of also the Latino culture to having very few Asians living in the country that makes it somewhat funny for them, and being interested in Asians as well and the culture even more so now from the 90s on with anime, getting so popular around the world, many of my friends were always very interested in my culture, in my dad's way of raising us up.

So my dad also opened the first Japanese restaurant in El Salvador. At that time, people didn't know what sushi was. So my dad would prepare these bento boxes for us and delivered it to our school and we would have all the kids from our classes getting around us and asking, "Oh, what's that? What is that green thing?" We would have so much fun at lunchtime, teaching them [about the different types of Japanese food], and even sometimes, friends would get the wasabi out of my plate thinking it was avocado. So you would have all these types of funny faces and whatnot. And eating sushi for the first time for all of my classmates, it was very fun to see how they evolved from sometimes trying it for the first time, they didn't like it, and by the end of the year, everybody loved sushi. So it was a very interesting cultural exchange we had in our school with my siblings, also having that same situation in the different grades they were.

So I guess that's part of being biracial and growing up in another country, in being able to share your culture in those years, showing something completely new to our classmates, you know, it was a very interesting experience because probably, now, if you have somebody like me, at that time, it will not be the same because everybody knows about sushi these days. And everybody is more used to anime and more globalization and all those type of things. So I guess that made it very unique for us growing in the 90s, being able to share about our Japanese culture to our friends those years. So in a way, I considered myself Japanese because I was eating something different than my friends were. So even

though I don't look 100% Japanese, I don't look 100% Salvadoran either. So that was some of the fun parts of being able to share about my father's culture.

**F:**

***Takeshi reflects upon the Japanese community in El Salvador and how it was affected by the Civil War.***

**T:**

In the years of the Civil War, many Japanese left El Salvador. In that time, the Japanese community was growing, but because of the war, many Japanese left. So my family was one of the very few Japanese families that stayed in El Salvador. So yeah, the Japanese community during our time growing up in El Salvador was very small. There were not many Asians in El Salvador when we were growing up, and people were not used to seeing many Asians around. So we were a novelty in that sense, being Asian was not very seen. Also, nowadays, it's 2024 now, the Japanese community is bigger than it was when I was a kid. And El Salvador's changing so much these years and with the new president in El Salvador, many tourists are coming back to El Salvador. And you can see it around in the streets. So it's definitely a whole new world, like today compared to 20 years ago, to what El Salvador was, and what El Salvador is now.

But also, we can mention about growing up in El Salvador at that time was growing up in one of the most violent and most dangerous countries in the world, compared to Japan at that time and now, [Japan is] still one of the safest countries in the world, and also, one of the richest countries in the world. So it was such a big contrast, Japan and Salvador. So yeah, to see that contrast, growing up and sharing with friends about these differences about my dad's opinions, opinions about different things and comparing my mom's opinions with things like, well, just the city being so clean in Japan and sometimes having very disorganized cities in El Salvador that time...

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**F:**

***As Takeshi mentioned earlier, he moved to Japan after his studies in the U.S. to further pursue his track and field career. There, he would experience something surprising.***

**T:**

Going to Japan as a grown-up was also very interesting. Since I thought all my life that I was probably more Japanese than Salvadoran, I thought I would, in Japan, I would find myself relating to others very easy. But it was a surprise for me. Because in Japan, everybody asked me where I was from. And when I said, "I'm Japanese," they would shake their heads or look at me, you know, like in a surprised way, asking me again, "No, but where are you from?" And later on, I understood that they understood that I was probably Japanese from my father's side or... but the question was really, "Why do you not look 100% Japanese?" So they were entitled to an explanation, it seemed. So I learned to say, "Oh, well, my mom is Salvadoran." Until I said that explanation, they were, "Oh, I see. Now I understand your situation, your looks." It seemed like that piece of information had to be said.

**F:**

***Takeshi shares his take on representation in the world of sports.***

**T:**

When it comes to representation, we can say it in track and field, in Japan, for example, there are more international looking athletes because of migration, right? We have migrations from Africa, we have migrations from the US, we have migration from the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America. And kids like us grow, and there's a tendency to pursue whatever our parents' cultures and countries love. For example, if I were American, probably I would be more into trying to do track and field or maybe play American football. And so we also have not only this tendency to follow something we're good at, but

also, there's a cultural tendency to follow something that's trendy for us because our parents liked it or because we have experienced something fun when we have visited some other country, whether it was our parents' country or some someplace we lived before. So yeah, as you said, representation is important. And the more representation there is in different sports and in even in things like our jobs, for example, professional places, it's important to... these things play an important role, I believe.

**F:**

***Takeshi reflects about his own experiences as a half-Japanese half-Salvadoran athlete and representation.***

**T:**

It's a thing in Japan, right? "If you don't look Japanese, then you most likely shouldn't be called Japanese," sometimes, they [Japanese people] would say. So I tried to look at it in the most positive way I could. I tried to enjoy as much as I could and then tried to represent Japan knowing that my father's Japanese and also knowing that my mother is Salvadoran, that's the way I tried to represent Japan. Not trying to be a new type of droid or robot where I completely forgot about where I came from. It's, "Hey, this is me. This is me, this is Takeshi, and my second name is Salvador." In Japan, that's also not a thing, you can't have a second name right? But still, my second name is Salvador, and yes, my last name is Fujiwara, and this is who I am. I'm half Japanese and half Salvadoran and I'm here to represent Japan in the 400 meters, enjoying it as much as I can whether some like it and some don't, right? It's been a growing trend now with foreigners coming to Japan and see new athletes in different sports that don't look as the Japanese everybody else in the world expects, and that Japan expects sometimes.

But I guess it's the beauty of being able to embrace this... just humanity in itself. It's part of being humans to mingle, and I think it's almost inhuman not to be able to share and to come together as humans with different races just because we're not the same. So that is really something that has touched the way I want to share my view of the of the world and sharing the best of both sides has always been my goal. Whether you're Japanese 100% or European or Latino, or American, we will always have differences. Even within one same country, one same continent, even there are many differences. And I think race is something that is not... is not obliged to just fit the mold and expectations as people want it. But really, we all need empathy and love to be able to be happy, really. If we cannot accept these differences, I think you will be encountering a very sad life whether you live in Japan or whether you live elsewhere.

I think empathy is the best thing about being able to embrace something new. And why I say this, is because anyone who has traveled and anyone that has been in a new country outside of their own country has been able to experience what it is to feel foreign and to be a foreigner somewhere else. So having this experience of you yourself being a foreigner in how you are treated, in how you feel in new environments where you probably don't understand the signs in the streets or the language in the restaurant menu, that's where empathy comes in. Because that's probably the only way you can understand how you treat others, or how you treat foreigners in your own country can make a difference.

**F:**

***Against the background of his experiences, Takeshi shares his take on what it takes and means to be antiracist.***

**T:**

I think definitely, there are some situations where I would think, "This person is being racist." Yeah, I think there's definitely been... I've been in situations where I felt that [racism], but I... to empathize as well in that sense of, "Is this person just having a bad day?" I should just move aside and continue with

my life, you know. As much as that is possible, one can continue doing it, right, getting away from those types of situations as much as possible because it's really hard to change people's minds and to change people's opinions.

And if somebody's being racist, I'm sure that I wouldn't be able to change his mind in that moment. And it will probably take a lifetime for somebody that has a set of beliefs that is contrary to being empathic with somebody else into being loving to somebody else, whether they look the same or different from themselves. So yeah, it's not about being a good person and just trying to be an angel and just trying to be [in the mindset of], "Everything's good." But really knowing that there are people having a bad time, and probably one will not be able to change them just by letting them know they're being racist. It's the challenge, how we're going to be able to make a difference and how people will be able to embrace the openness of humanity.

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**F:**

***You can find more information about race-related issues in sports, as well as other articles, books and videos Takeshi recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, [www.ourcontexts.org](http://www.ourcontexts.org).***

***You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.***

***If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our\_racism.***

***This is Fumi and #OUR\_racism. See you next month, on May 1<sup>st</sup>!***

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***This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.***

***Music by Pete Morse, Crescent Music and Fugu Vibes. This podcast is powered by the Competence Centre for Diversity and Inclusion at the University of St. Gallen.***

***A warm thank you to Takeshi for his invaluable time in going down memory lane for us and sharing with us timely reflections on this issue.***