

Bold(her)

Maya Gabeira: Out of Your Comfort Zone

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Lisa Bragg:

She's chased the highest of waves and surfed them, Maya Gabeira has the world records to prove it, along with long recovery times after life-threatening injuries, she also has the bumps and bruises and joy that owning businesses can bring.

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I'm Lisa Bragg and this is Bold(h)er, helping you make your next bold move, brought to you by BMO for Women.

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You've ridden so many roller coasters, as in waves, throughout your career. How has that prepared you for the businesses that you now have founded and are working in?

Maya Gabeira:

I think essential. I think sports was really the way for me to learn about myself and about the world in a way. A lot of the hard lessons I had, I didn't go to university, I didn't have really a traditional way of learning, but traveling the world and different cultures, different languages, having to perform, having the pressure, all of that, there was a lot of lessons and then in the ocean. I think it prepares you for the hardship, but at the same time, it's completely different. The process you have to live through.

Lisa Bragg:

Tell me more about that, the process you have to live through. Is that the process of the failures and the successes, that roller coaster? Tell me about that.

Maya Gabeira:

Yes. I think it's unavoidable. For me now in sports, it's still a roller coaster, but it's a familiar one. As crazy as it might sound, that type of failure and that type of recovery and rehab and getting back up, it's more natural to me than in the business world or writing a book or going out and doing a speech. Those are all things that I don't master. Those are things that I humbly put myself outside of my comfort zone and really just do my best, but it's not what I've been doing for 20 years. [chuckles]

Lisa Bragg:

There's a lot of learning, isn't there?

Maya Gabeira:

A lot of learning, a lot of realizing how little we know. [laughs]

Lisa Bragg:

Yet you keep taking on new projects. Why do that?

Maya Gabeira:

Yes. It's exciting to me. I think after the second world record, I really needed to expand and adventure into different things. I now am refocusing. I think I just want a competition. I've been doing a lot of different things for three years, and I have a lot of different projects to come out. I'm pretty focused on sports once again. I think it's important to have those moments where you get a little bit off, or you do other things in different areas, and you regather your motivation. You go back to whatever you've been doing for the longest, which in my case is surfing.

Lisa Bragg:

You do have these other businesses going still, too. You have a skincare line. You want to tell us a little bit about that? Because you have great skin. For someone who spends so much time out in the sun and a surf, your skin's amazing. Tell us about your skincare product.

Maya Gabeira:

Thank you. I don't have anything on but my product, which is actually a sunscreen, [chuckles] which is the only thing I use every day. It would be actually my skincare routine. In Blue Aya, I founded a small company run by myself and my mother, and we sell organic sunscreen for water performance and also for just everyday life to protect our skin and to raise awareness of skin cancer, which is extremely large in Brazil and many places in the world.

We use seaweed, which is a passion of mine. I love seaweed. I love what it does to nature and how it regenerates the ocean coast. We dug into that a little bit, and we work with mostly women up northeast of Brazil, and they collect sustainably the seaweed. They're all wives of fishermen, and now they have a way of also working by the coast, which is difficult. They collect the seaweed, and we also use that in our product on the everyday sunscreen, which is a wonderful circular product full of great ingredients.

Lisa Bragg:

Did you come to it right away knowing that you wanted to be that intentional all the way through?

Maya Gabeira:

No, it was a process. It took three years for the product to hit shelf. It was a long development. To be honest, it was brutal, [laughs] maybe too long for your first startup in a way. It was a lot of developing and researching and formulating and testing and trying and understanding all the ingredients, where they came from, who was benefiting from it, if it was sustainable, if it was not.

We don't use plastic in the company. That was a whole research in itself. It was very hard to drive away from plastic and that industry of cosmetics. It's such a cheap and useful packaging, but it has such a backlash in nature and in our health as we are finding microplastics in our heart now and brain. It is a health issue as well. We had a lot of things to stick by, which were our values that took time and learning and gathering information to understand what was best.

Lisa Bragg:

That all just goes hand in hand with the climate action that you want all of us to take. Tell us about your work with Climate Action. You do have this product that helps sustainability and employment of people along the coast. What else about the sustainability of our oceans are you passionate about?

Maya Gabeira:

I am in the ocean most of my days, so I'm a big ocean lover. I've come to realize, see it firsthand with pollution and life, effects like that in the last 20 years but also through people, science, reading, information, understanding the real, real problems we have in the ocean now and how it affects climate and how climate change is related and how it is such an essential tool for humankind. I just felt, "Well, I'm always in the ocean. We got to do something about it. Why not step up and engage and understand what's happening and try and use my voice and my platform and some of my creativity to influence and good?"

Lisa Bragg:

Then just if anyone else is thinking she's slacking, she has two books, and one's about to come out soon. Tell us about the Maya series and why this is important to you. They're children's books. They're beautiful picture books. Tell us about them.

Maya Gabeira:

Yes, that was all Ramona. She's amazing, the illustrator. I'm a big fan. During the pandemic, I was away from my nephew. I couldn't really see him. I missed him dearly. He was around three or four. I was walking daily, just isolated with my two dogs. I just felt like, "Okay, what were the creative things I can do?" The picture book was a no-brainer. I thought, I want to connect with him, I want to write to him or to that age group and tell my story.

Yes, so that's literally how it came to me. The name came to me, walking with my dogs on that path that I was doing every day and that I did for many years with them. It was, yes, to connect, I think, to connect. I miss that connection. I wouldn't have it for years to come with the pandemic that was staggering and the distance that we live. He lives in Brazil, and I live in Portugal. The first book was *Maya and the Beast*. I tried to summarize and put a lot of what I went through and my emotions and my challenges into the experience of a six-year-old Maya that grew up in Nazaré and wanted to serve the beast, which was the wave of Nazaré.

On the second book, that was more challenging, I guess, because I wanted to intentionally motivate kids to do something about the ocean, be aware of the ocean, fall in love for the ocean and understand that there is an issue. I had those recollections of moments in the ocean that have really marked me as a person. Those were true stories once with a turtle in a singular condition, then with a whale in a singular condition and with shark. I narrate that through my experiences being Maya. Then I try to leave a little bit of an intention in the end.

Lisa Bragg:

You are a long-term player on all the things that you're doing. To write books and to sell books takes a lot of time. It's a long-term game to own a business. You said three years in research to get it out to production. You've been surfing for, since you were 15?

Maya Gabeira:

13, 14. I started, and I turned professional when I was 19.

Lisa Bragg:

Those are all long-term games, my friend. [laughs] We all want to win or get a Guinness World Record today or win that top, whatever it is in our field today, but it's all long-term games. Is that something you've come to realize?

Maya Gabeira:

Yes. I'm definitely that type of player. Absolutely.

Lisa Bragg:

Do you ever worry that you're going to fail on all these things? There's so many plates that you have up in the air, and you're spinning them. Do you ever worry about failure?

Maya Gabeira:

Not so much, no. I deal with them when they happen, and it's like, I always say failure, what is failure, right? Failure is what? When you get frustrated, when you try for something, and you thought that the outcome should have been X, and it's not, and you feel like you failed, or did you try, and you didn't get that outcome at that time, and you learned something, and then you can always try again or even change and feel like that's not the thing anymore. Failure, you can turn it into anything really, because I think it comes from frustration.

Lisa Bragg:

Tell me more about that. The frustration, because I'm sure you've been frustrated as you've gone for all those big waves in the past or gone to get a new supplier for your products. Tell me about frustration for you.

Maya Gabeira:

I think frustration and whatever you may feel like it's failure, it's when you try, and you aim for something, you don't get it at that time. Those are experiences that are hard experiences. If you want to evolve, and if you're in that path, you look in, and it's hard, and there's insights that you take that you try and make changes.

Lisa Bragg:

We had a pre-chat, you said to me something really good, and it was a good reminder for where I was on that day that failing is just learning. That's so true. Failing is just learning. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Maya Gabeira:

Yes, that every failure, it's just another opportunity for you to add something, which was why you failed, a few reasons you failed, try again. If you never stopped trying, then you can't really classify as a failure, right? If you're not seeking an end, which why would you? There's no end for life. We're in this on the longterm. That's what I hope for. We have time, and we should experience. Yes, we should commit. I think commitment is an important thing, too.

Lisa Bragg:

You said that winning is wonderful, but it doesn't last. It's not enduring because so many of us are looking for that big win, that win overall, but it doesn't last. We're always onto the next thing. People like us, we're always, "What's the next thing?" You're going to start a new product or a new book or a new wave that you're going to go after. It's always something, it's not enduring. Tell me a bit about that.

Maya Gabeira:

Yes, I just had a win recent, that I was, of course, very happy about. I won the Nazaré challenge again. It was late January, and I was coming from an injury, so it was a very difficult contest for me.

New partner, toe-in partner, 21-year-old, he got injured in the contest. It was challenging, and we still won on the female award. That win was fantastic. For me walking away from it, I was right back into training, trying to get to the next swell.

It's almost like there's a switch after, but what I was really able to sink in from this win was seeing everyone around. That is actually a very good moment. You realize it doesn't really, it doesn't last. It doesn't last. It doesn't satisfy. It doesn't satisfy. There's something about the path that is much more interesting, fulfilling and real than the actual goal. Sometimes it can be almost disappointing when you get that win, and you get that high, and then you get the low after, it can be disappointing because you put a lot of emotions into when I get that, everything's going to be fine. [laughs]

You get there, and you're like, "I'm here. Wow." It's usually quite normal. Then you still have all your problems. Everyday life, it's where it's at. It's the long-term. It's the commitment. It's the passion. It's the learning. It's the experiences. It's the people around you. It's the things that oftentimes we take for granted almost.

Lisa Bragg:

Yes. It's that play long-term games with long-term people is one of the quotes that I've heard that I just love that.

Maya Gabeira:

I love that, too.

Lisa Bragg:

Yes. All the people that go with you on your journey that make things better. You've mentioned that you've won so many things. You've had a lot of challenges along the way, and one of them was almost life-ending for you. Tell us a little bit about what happened to you.

Maya Gabeira:

Yes, that was the first time I came to Nazaré in 2013. I was 26 at the time, and I was surfing with Carlos Burle at the time. He was a mentor coach, and we came, me and two other younger, my age and Carlos. It was our first time here, still a lot to learn about the place. We ended up surfing a really gigantic day. I was chasing basically a woman's world record but not aware of what we were really going to encounter. 28th of October, 2013, we were here in Nazaré, it was gigantic. We went to the water with the logistics that we use to surf other places.

When the sport was at a different places, just not here, the protocol of safety here has really changed our sport. Very early days, I almost died. I had a near-drowning experience in that morning, trying to surf the biggest wave of my life, which would have been the biggest wave a woman had ever surfed. I was resuscitated on the beach and had a broken fibula, then had severe injuries from it on my spine. Basically had four years of rehab with three spine surgeries to finally get back to a place where I could actually ride those giant waves again.

Lisa Bragg:

You've gone on to do amazing things since then. When you started, too, you were the only girl, the only woman doing the sport. Did that play into a lot of how you've had to have resilience in it? I read that you wrote that you're an immigrant, you were a woman, you were young, and you're pioneering a field that was just seen as something for men. It was a sea of men out there. Do you think that plays into your resilience now that you are older, and you have all these businesses going on?

Maya Gabeira:

Yes, I think so. I think I'm more resilient. I think gave me experience. It was a different time, too. No Instagram, no real awareness of women in fields like that. You don't see the same prejudice, I think, now in sports, like we used to 10, 15 years ago. It has definitely changed with how social media and all the movements, and this new feminism wave, I believe, has made people more aware and more careful. I think we were under more scrutiny back then.

Lisa Bragg:

Are you seeing more young women show up to participate?

Maya Gabeira:

Oh yes. No, my sport is more women than ever before. Still not many but might have eight girls in the water on a big day here, which is amazing. I came from nobody, no other girls in the water, and to have girls that are prepared to surf those size waves, yes, it's amazing.

Lisa Bragg:

We have to sometimes see it to be it.

Maya Gabeira:

Yes, I believe so. I think representation is definitely important. Sometimes you have to break that concept barrier, that kind of perspective that you have to look a certain way to do certain things.

Lisa Bragg:

A lot of people who listen to our podcast, they're still the only one or the only one of where they've come from to be in the room, the boardroom, selling that product, whatever it is. What would you say to them as part of your advice from resilience and keep going and your go-get-it attitude?

Maya Gabeira:

Find the good guys. There's always good guys, mentors out there. I've been helped in my career a lot by men that were extremely good at what they were doing. They were willing to share, and they saw the real value that a woman in the top would bring because we are different, and we really add to each other. Because my sport is team, is two people, I've always been able to come in with attributes that women have more solidified, even though I lacked maybe on athleticism at times or strength or pure power, and I had the opportunity to really seek to evolve alongside the best man. I think that's very important, understanding how to work together.

Lisa Bragg:

You said in our pre-chat that you had years that you felt lost in it because we think we have that horizon, we're going to that one place, and then sometimes there's things in our lives that happen that take us off course. Tell me about those years that you felt lost and how you got back on your path.

Maya Gabeira:

I think for me, the sensation of being lost also comes from less motivation is when I lose, because when you're really focused, and you know what you want, the motivation is usually there. When I lose that vision, that clear goal, I go off track. That's when I feel like life pulls me in different directions, and it's normal. I've been trying to understand and accept those moments.

There are, for me, moments that I learn a lot. I'm usually in hardship, or I'm injured for long periods of time. For me, it's usually injuries that really take me off because I do get injured quite a bit, and my

injuries tend to take a long time for me to recover. Those are hard. Those are hard, but eventually, you just feel like you have it in you again. You see it clear. It's even hard to explain, but it's like at some point, it clicks and you see what you want again. You're sure of what you want, and you move in that direction.

((Music))

Lisa Bragg:

I've owned a business for a long time. It's not always fun, and people don't go into business necessarily because it's fun. You said that people don't get into big wave surfing because it's just fun. Tell me about that thinking that. There's a lot of hard work that goes into both those things.

Maya Gabeira:

To me, there's days that are fun out there, but then there's a lot of days that are just challenging. I think in any line of work, when you go into it, there's always going to be, well, at least I seek things that will put me out of comfort, that will make me push, that will make me motivated, that will make me feel like there's more and more and more. To me, big wave surfing is like that because it really puts me out of my comfort, and it's challenging, it's always changing, and it's unpredictable. You've got to be really on top of your game to be out there.

Lisa Bragg:

Tell me what that feeling is as you get out of your comfort zone, and you're psyching yourself up to do something that's not something you've been doing for the last 10 years or 3 years or whatever it is. What's that experience like for you?

Maya Gabeira:

I think it brings you more perspective, new perspective, new experiences. For me also, when you start working out of your comfort zone, that becomes your comfort zone, and that is also a great way to keep evolving. People often ask how I started to surf big waves, and of course, I didn't start surfing 60, 70 foot waves. I started surfing 6-foot waves and feeling uncomfortable and feeling challenged and figuring out what I had to do to find the ability to be out there. Then I pushed that into a little bigger and then that a little bigger. What used to be out of my comfort zone now is in my comfort zone, and I'm seeking bigger challenges.

Lisa Bragg:

Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Maya Gabeira:

Yes. It's very important. It's very, very important.

Lisa Bragg:

You've been able to do that uncomfortable and then also with your owning your values. I think that's really interesting because you're seeking these new opportunities, but then you're also holding true to your values. Any thoughts on really how you anchored what you do in your values? Did you take time to reflect? Did you have to pivot? What was it about staying in your values with all the things that you're doing?

Maya Gabeira:

No. I had to dig deep. I had to dig deep. Yes. I don't think they come easily. I think it's looking inside a lot, finding what you really want, who you are and sticking to it. It's challenging, but if you don't do that, it's hard to maintain for the long term. Like you said, I'm a long-term player. You got to be true to yourself. Otherwise, you can't maintain it. You can't fake it. You have to know your values. You have to make amends with things that you might have to change but really look inside and be honest.

Lisa Bragg:

Because I'm sure so many people are coming to you with opportunities now. You are a social media influencer, if we want to use that term, and you've really been a pioneer and leader in a field. How do you keep on that path when all these other people are showing you these other paths along the way? How do you keep on your path?

Maya Gabeira:

Knowing what you really want, what motivates you. If you can't choose tomorrow, would you be happy? Because we're not here forever. I can say that because I have been seen black before, and I went through a near-deaf experience. When you put that into perspective, time is our biggest asset. If we're not doing what we really want, we're wasting time. We're wasting time, and time is very precious.

Lisa Bragg:

Yes, time is very precious. It's keeping going and planting those seeds and planting those seeds, and then you're going to have success. Is that what you would say to somebody who's coming along, or any age and stage, is that what your advice would be?

Maya Gabeira:

Yes, keep going, don't give up. Don't give up, keep going, keep learning. You're going to fail, if you want to call it fail, or you're going to learn, if you want to call it learn. You're going to struggle. I think anything that you can do it for a long time, it's very rewarding if you find your path, and you're true to yourself, and you keep on evolving and accepting the experiences.

Lisa Bragg:

I think our audience would be saying, "How does she have so much belief in herself?" How do you have that belief?

Maya Gabeira:

I don't. I don't always have this belief. [laughs] I question myself, too. No, I've had doubts about myself. I feel insecure. No, to be very honest, every start of the season in September, I'm not sure if I can do it. I'm not sure if I have what it takes to go down those massive waves one more year. I always have to fight off that. I can only fight off that with work, with training, with being out there, with showing up day in, day out. Turn that doubt into action, and that's how, I believe, you make things happen.

((Music))

Lisa Bragg:

You know what? I did notice when I was researching you, that you have your family involved and that you had things to your dad and to your mom. How important is it to have people like your parents or allies around you and people there supporting you? Tell us a little bit about that.

Maya Gabeira:

Yes, that's so important. That's so important. My dad, I went to live with my dad when I was 13, and I left his house when I was 15. I left Brazil when I was 17. I was very young. I think one of the reasons I was able to bravely go into the world was because my dad always used to say, "Go. I'm always here on the background." I knew that if everything failed, I had where to run back to. [laughs] That is a huge vote of confidence from a dad to a young daughter saying like, "Go ahead, go out there. I trust you. If it fails, just come back here." That was just gold. [laughs]

Lisa Bragg:

Yes. I think for a lot of parents, when they hear how young you were going out into the world, I think that's nerve-wracking. To have that open sense of, "Go fly, and if you need a safe harbor, come back home," is a brilliant way to put it.

Maya Gabeira:

Yes. In a time that there was no Instagram or FaceTime or WhatsApp, it was really hard communication. We barely spoke. I can only imagine how hard it was on them, but they saw that they had to do that in order for me to seek my own self and my true self.

Lisa Bragg:

Do you find it's harder now, though, or easier now, because when you started your career, we didn't have all the social media and all these voices, but we had very strong voices that were allowed to have lots of pull and sway in the world. Do you find it's easier to navigate now though, or is it harder because there's so many more voices?

Maya Gabeira:

I think it's easier now. At least in my sport, we're talking about the sport now that has competition for women, that has world records for women, that is getting equal prize purse, woman and man in the professional level. Yes, it hasn't proven a lot. I think because we are an individual sport that doesn't really have a strong league behind, it's still a bit loose. Social media has also benefited us. We can share our content, we can tell our stories. It has been good for our sport for sure.

Lisa Bragg:

Did all that chafing though, at the beginning where you didn't have the success, you had the doubters, the naysayers though. I know we talked on resilience a little bit, but having that friction, has that made you a long-term player, or do you think if it were easier that you would have just been there, done that and gone on to the next thing?

Maya Gabeira:

Good question. That made me tougher. It's good when you get things that are hard. I'm very relieved that I saw both times, both eras, because I know how it was and how it sucked. Now I see how much better it is. It should be. There's still a long ways to go. For me, I was questioned like, "Oh, how do you feel about winning recently?" I was like, it's a privilege because for somebody that has seen the time when we had nothing for women, one award only for \$5,000, that was all you got if you surfed all year long big waves.

Going from that, the platform that we have now and the amount of girls that we have invested in the sport now and guys in the level that the sport is, for me, it's a blessing to still be competing. Winning is cherry on the top of the cake because honestly, to be able to experience those both times, I would

be so sad if my accident had stopped me because I would be the person that had only experienced those hard times.

Now, I get to really benefit and enjoy with the girls out there and see this change and this new era and this new acceptance that undeniably is helping our limits to push higher and higher.

Lisa Bragg:

It was a bit of fuel for you having that friction then?

Maya Gabeira:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. No, it was a fuel. It was a fuel when things got better too, because now that I had all that friction, now I want to enjoy this. I want to make things happen. I want to live the dream because this was the dream.

Lisa Bragg:

Now, I read that you really are about visualizing and keeping your dreams in a diary. Do you still keep a diary?

Maya Gabeira:

I don't these days, but I am a big dreamer. Everything that happens in my life I had dreamed before, basically. Rarely something comes and like, oops. No, it has been years in the making, in my mind. [laughs]

Lisa Bragg:

What are you dreaming up now then? What's on the horizon for you?

Maya Gabeira:

Oh, no, but the big ones I don't share. No, no, no, because they're so crazy if I put it out there-- I don't know, the big ones I don't share. We'll see. We'll see.

Lisa Bragg:

What's one that you're already working on that's not a dream, that's actually a step forward. Is there anything else then that you're chasing right now then besides your book launches and your skincare and the next big wave? Is there anything else that you're doing?

Maya Gabeira:

Hopefully, we get to see *Maya and the Wave*, the documentary, out in theaters this year, by August or September. We'll see.

Lisa Bragg:

Maya, we'll be watching for it. Thank you.

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You've been listening to Bold(h)er, helping women make their next bold move, brought to you by BMO for Women.

I'm Lisa Bragg. Join us for our next episode. Jenny Blake wonders if she'll have a vulnerability hangover in a few months, but she's having a tough time professionally like so many people are, and she's not waiting until life is all roses again to tell you about it.