

Episode 35: Ross was blinded by his father

In an ideal world, children should be able to trust their parents. After all, it's the grown-ups in the family who are responsible for the kids. No child should ever have to worry about safety when mom and dad are around for protection, in an ideal world.

That's the world Ross thought he was living in when he was 8 years old, with his older brother Ryan, who was 10. They were happy kids with no reason to be afraid. Until one night at their home in Charlotte, North Carolina, when his mother told his father she wanted a divorce. That's when something snapped in Ross's dad's mind, and he got a gun, and forever changed the history of their family.

Ross is 21 now, and he's permanently blind. And he's amazing. He's currently at the Colorado Springs Olympic and Paralympic Training Center, where he's training to swim in the Summer 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo.

We talked about a lot of things – what happened that night, how he and his mother have adapted, how difficult it was to learn Braille, getting his first guide dog, how he is able to play computer video games, why he sometimes wears earplugs, and how he can swim competitively without being able to see.

Ross has plans for a career in software engineering, and there's no doubt in my mind that he'll meet that challenge.

If you'd like to contact him, you can email Ross at rossaminor@gmail.com.

On the show notes for this episode, I'll have links to all of his socials, as well as his popular YouTube channel. After you listen to this episode, be sure to go and check out his XMO speech and you'll see how inspiring it is. All of those links are at whatwasthatlike.com/35.

And if you'd like to join the others who support this podcast for as little as \$1 per month, you can do that at WhatWasThatLike.com/support

And now, please enjoy my rather wide-ranging conversation with Ross.

Scott

What do you remember about your childhood before this happened?

Ross

I honestly remember a lot about my childhood. There are several distinct memories I have from way back when I was, like, 3 or 4 years old. My childhood is definitely, like, the fun part of my life - not that my life isn't good. Now, my life is great. I kind of feel that looking back on our childhood would be a bit of nostalgia, but it's a little bit more amplified for me because that was when I could see. I was born in Virginia Beach, Virginia in 1998. I moved to Charlotte, North Carolina with my family when I was 3 years old, I think, in 2001. I guess I live my life like the most clear-cut normal kid you could imagine. I had a friend, a dog, a brother, and two parents. I went to a great school.

Scott

Sounds like a Norman Rockwell painting, sort of - other than the video games - right?

Ross

Yeah, exactly. Back when I was younger, I was more of the indoor type. I was, kind of, more reserved and passive. My brother was a lot like my dad. He liked going outside a lot, building tree houses with his friends, and just hanging out in the woods. So, he was an outdoor kind of person and I was an indoor kind of person.

Scott

And your brother was older than you, right?

Ross

Yeah, my brother, Ryan, is two years older than me.

Scott

Okay.

Ross

So, that's like an overview of my childhood - I was, definitely, a normal kid

Scott

When you were 8 years old, was there any kind of history of violence or abuse or anything like that?

Ross

No, none at all. From my perspective as a kid, I had no idea that anything was going on whatsoever. From my mom's perspective - I mean, I can't speak for her because I'm sure it's a very complicated situation - my dad was abusive, manipulative, and controlling with money. After everything happened, he was suspected of being a narcissist and, by extension, possibly a sociopath. So, no, I had no idea anything was going on. Then, my mom kind of did everything she could to keep what was going on away from us. He wasn't abusive at all. He never hit my mom. He was just a very manipulative person.

Scott

Do you think he may have had some type of mental illness then?

Ross

Yeah, it's likely. But mental illness and everything really started to get focused in 2010. Before then, mental illnesses weren't really, like, hot topics at that time. So, I don't think, while he was alive, that he went and got help for anything because it wasn't in the front of people's minds at that time.

Scott

Do you remember anything from the night that it happened?

Ross

I'm gonna, overall, say, "No, I don't remember anything." I had, like, a TV show episode on Investigation Discovery a few months ago. I watched it and liked it. It really stirred up some memories about that night because, before I went to bed blind. I mean, I went to bed sighted and, literally, woke up in the hospital bed blind. I didn't remember anything.

Scott

So this TV show you were watching was about your story?

Ross

Yeah.

Scott

Okay.

Ross

So, basically, what happened that night was - or if you want to be technical, it was, like, 7 in the morning - I was asleep and my mom was downstairs on the computer.

Scott

And Ryan was asleep, too?

Ross

Yeah, Ryan was asleep as well. There were a lot of strange details around what happened that I think are worth mentioning, now that I am older and understand them a bit more. My dad never drank that much. I mean, he would have a beer, but he mainly drinks socially. In the morning, my mom came downstairs and there was just a bunch of, like, empty bottles on the counter. She was in the office. My dad came in. By then, she had already told him that she wanted a divorce. So, he was like, "Please, Grace, don't leave me." She told him, "Mark, we're gonna get you help." Obviously, because of the whole alcohol, he went upstairs - I guess they had a safe in their closet - and pulled out the .22 revolver. He went into my room first and shot me in my sleep when my mom was downstairs. When he shot me in my sleep, she came upstairs because she heard what happened. While she was checking on me, he went and shot my brother who was asleep. Then, after that, she went into Ryan's room because she heard the gunshot from there. She saw my dad and she asked him, like, "Why did you do this?!?!" If I remember correctly, he just started, like, screaming, "I don't know!!!" Obviously, I wasn't conscious of that, but that's what my mom said happened.

Then, she ran back to check on me because I was yelling for her. I'm gonna cut from that story because when I was watching that Investigation Discovery episode, that's the part that really started, like, stirring up memories for me. I remember me yelling for my mom and my mom would come in, tell me that it was going to be okay, and cupped her hand over my left eye because my left eye is the one that got taken out. So, she called 911. I was in my bed yelling for her. My brother didn't respond because he was just shot - he didn't wake up because a bullet went into his brain. Lucky for us, our next-door neighbor happened to be a police officer, so he was able to, kind of, call ahead and clear the highways for us. So, we got to the hospital. I believe my dad died in the ambulance when my brother died the next day. So, I was rushed to the hospital and my left eye had to be removed. When I was shot, I was on my side in bed, so my dad shot me in my right temple. The bullet went through my head, missed my right eye, went through my nasal cavity, took out my left eye, and exited out of my left temple into my left hand. So, my right eye wasn't damaged at all, but the retina and optic nerve were severed - that's what's causing the blindness in my right eye. So, there's still a real eye - I can still move it around, but I just can't see out of it, because the nerves are severed. My left eye was just too damaged to even save, so they took that out - that's what's causing the blindness in my left eye. The bullet completely miss my brain and didn't touch it at all. Since it went through my sinuses, I am no longer able to smell either. Then, yeah, it exited out into the palm of my left hand.

Scott

So, you were sleeping with your head on top of your hand?

Ross

Exactly, yeah. The reason why I explained that is because some people don't understand that, "Oh, how did the bullet go from your left temple to your hand?" I was sleeping with my head on my hand - that's how that all happened. I went to bed sighted and woke up in the hospital bed blind. It was almost like I was drifting in and out of consciousness - I don't know if that was actually what I was doing. I remember being in a hospital bed, going up an elevator, asking a nurse for a glass of water, waking up, actually being conscious, and understanding that I was awake - like I woke up from a nap or something - before it was, kind of, like, a bunch of flashes.

Scott

Well, you're probably on pain medication too.

Ross

I probably was. Again, I don't know the exact chronological order of how everything happened, but my left eye was removed. I was in the hospital for about 5 weeks recovering.

Scott

Who told you what happened? How did you find out?

Ross

My mom told me. When she saw that I was awake, she came over and told me what happened. She has always done her best to be honest with me. So, she just told me what happened. She told me how my dad had shot me and shot Ryan, and that they are gone. I guess that this must have been, like, a couple of days after my brother died because my mom got to go say goodbye to him when I must have been in surgery. So, this was all after the fact. She just told me that I was blind. I asked her if I'd ever be able to see again and she said 'No'. So, I just kind of laid there for who knows how long and just processed it. I always tell people that, out of there in the movies, when someone's giving horrible news, you'd expect them to lash out or start crying or whatever, but when I received news like that, there's no proper way to respond to it, especially as a kid. I don't think that, as a kid, I really was fully aware of the ramifications of being blind in a sighted world. So, yeah, that's kind of how she told me.

Scott

I'm just trying to think for an 8-year-old boy. All at one time, you've just lost your brother, your father, and your sight. Losing any one of those things would be just overwhelming, but to have all three of them told at the same time... It's like your whole world was just completely flipped upside down.

Ross

Yeah. And people always asked me, like, "You must be so strong. How do you cope with this?" Well, things aren't always clear-cut. If I were my age now when those things happened to me, then that's a totally different story because I had, like, 20-21 years to know my family, my brother, my father, and my mother. I would feel a lot more betrayed that my father did something like that to me now rather than if I was 8. I've only been on the earth for eight years, so I don't have a huge understanding of the complexities of life or major right and wrong. When you're a kid, you only think about the next day - that's pretty much what I did. After I went blind, I just kind of lived my life day-to-day. Even then, it's not like I did all that by myself. I had my mom

supporting me. I had all my friends and family supporting me. Some people don't get that opportunity, and I think that's what makes the difference and how I, kind of, dealt with everything.

Scott

As I was doing some research and reading some articles and things for this, it sounds like your mom is just incredible.

Ross

Yeah. She's always been my greatest advocate and my main supporter. She's been strong for me. I mean, she struggled immensely since the loss of her first son and her husband. I was eight, so I didn't really know what it meant. My mom was, like, "Well, great. My only son is blind and I don't know how to raise a blind kid. Like, I don't know how he's gonna live in the world because - for most people who aren't familiar with disabilities, they would think that - if you have a disability, your life is awful and you may not be able to do as much as a sighted person." Back then, my mom was probably thinking those kinds of thoughts. So, think about how desperate or panicked she must have been because of that. If you put that into context and see how she raised me, she's done a great job. Like I said, she struggled with depression, anxiety, and PTSD after what happened to her.

Scott

As you were just processing this, aside from the loss of half of your family, how were you thinking about going forward while not being able to see? I mean, were you thinking, "How am I gonna go to school? How am I gonna even just walk around?"

Ross

None of that. Those are the kinds of questions that you would ask when you're older. When you're a kid, I think we all forget that we don't have those kinds of critical thinking skills. So, for me, I was like, "Okay. Well, this is it. I gotta keep going." Looking back now, I don't know if some part of me realize this, at that time, but now that I think about it, I think, "Okay, what was I going to do? Either live my life blind or just give up?" I was only 8 years old. I had so much. I had so much energy and so much more to live for. I'm not going to give up the rest of my life just because I'm blind.

Scott

Right. Yeah, I can see that. Or it's just the logic of a kid thinking, "Well, I've got my mom. She'll take care of things."

Ross

Yeah, exactly. That's kind of what she did. I mean, there were so many obstacles that my mom had to hurdle that I wasn't even aware of until I actually grew up.

Scott

You said that you were in the hospital for 5 weeks. Did you just go back to school blind? How did that take place? How did you get back to school?

Ross

Well, since all of this happened in June, everything happened at the end of second grade, so I was able to start up third grade just fine. But the whole issue came in with "How is he going to read? How is he going to write? How is he going to navigate?" Most state/public schools offer

resources for people with disabilities. Well, it's not like my mom knew that at that time, so she had to decide, "Okay. Does Ross go back to St Matt's?" St. Matt was the private school that I went to at that time. "Or does he change schools?" Well, she wanted to keep me in the school I went to before because I'd be most familiar with all my friends. Well, the thing is that you would only get all of these government/public school amenities or services if you're going to a public school. So, long story short, there is this huge debate - not debate. My mom took the school district's due process because they wanted to send me to a public school. Well, my mom and my therapist at that time were arguing to send me back to private school because of all my friends and just me being more familiar with all my friends there. But if we went to a private school, then the public school wouldn't pay for any of my claim, my technology, or a teacher to teach me Braille - they wouldn't pay for any of that. Well, despite all that, my mom still kept me in a private school.

We had a bunch of fundraisers to raise money for, obviously, my medical bills, but then she used a lot of that money to also pay for the resources that I need. Stuff that you privately contract is really expensive. She would have to hire someone to teach me how to use a cane, she would have to hire someone to teach me how to read and write Braille, and that would cost thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars that she wouldn't have been able to afford if we didn't have the support of the community. So, we ended up taking them to due process and won the case but, by then, we had moved down to Florida. We wanted to move down to Florida because we won the case, but we couldn't afford the private school eventually, so I had to go to public school. While in public school, I had a really difficult time making friends because I had spent my whole life going to this elementary school with all my friends. Now, I was being placed in a public school in the fourth grade, completely blind, and with no friends. I went in not knowing anyone.

In seventh grade, we decided to move to Florida and enroll me in the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind. From there, I thrived. I had a lot of friends there. It was great being able to relate to people with the same disability. At the same time, around 10th grade, I decided that I wanted to leave FSD or Florida School for the Deaf and Blind because I've always been, kind of - I wouldn't say rebellious, not even the slightest - argumentative, strong-willed or, like, that kind of person. There were a lot of different rules at Florida School for the Deaf and Blind that were meant to protect the kids, but those really restricted us beyond belief. We didn't have a lot of freedom. We had bars on our windows. We weren't allowed to leave campus unless it were this time and this time, which is great, but then they would do things like ration our food meals. Since it was, like, a public school, technically, they would feed me the food of someone who was half my size and who was half my body. So, I was malnourished while I was on the swim team, and they didn't offer any advanced classes. I forgot to mention that it was a boarding school, so I would commute back home every weekend and the trips were getting tedious.

Scott

It just sounds like it wasn't really a good fit.

Ross

Yeah, it wasn't a good fit. I needed it for a while, but I outgrew it pretty quickly. That's when we found a scholarship that would allow me to go to a school of my choice. Then, the scholarship would determine how much money I needed to succeed in that school. Then, they would award me that money. So, I applied for it, got it, moved back to Jacksonville where we were living at that time, and went back to private school. So, the private high school was really where I, kind of, have the most growth and development in my life in high school just because of one of my

biggest struggles when I went blind. You'd think the hardest part of being blind is actually not being able to see, but the hardest part of being blind for me is interacting with people because it's just a whole other level - it's just so dynamic and there are so many different variables to it.

Scott

That's something that I definitely want to get into, as far as your interaction with sighted people and things like that. We will definitely get to that. During that time or since then, have you experienced depression at all?

Ross

Yeah. As a result of everything that happened, I've struggled with depression and PTSD but, honestly, not to the level that my mom has. My mom has really struggled with it. I went to a psychiatrist, and they prescribed me medicine, and I was good to go. I think that's kind of the difference between being asleep while everything happened versus actually living it - it was a lot more traumatic for my mom than it was for me.

Scott

I can imagine. I mean, she witnessed it. It really is hard for me to imagine how she could see all that happen and just not faint or go crazy or something.

Ross

Yeah, exactly. Well, she said that she remembers the event but, at the same time, it's all kind of blurry to her because it happened so fast. Like, the brain has a way of blocking out traumatic incidences or experiences. So yeah, definitely.

Scott

The school that you went back to in Jacksonville - is it called Bishop Schneider?

Ross

Yeah, Bishop Schneider is where I went to.

Scott

And that's where you graduated high school?

Ross

Yep, that's where I graduated high school. I finished up the rest of my high school there.

Scott

How did your friends and your classmates handle interacting with you when you were in school?

Ross

You would think that the hardest thing about being blind is not being able to see, worrying about how to get around, and stuff like that, but it's really the social interaction, in my opinion, just because it's just so much more complex than we really give time to think about. On the side of the sighted person, they're like, "Oh, I've never met a blind person before. How do I talk to them on my side?" They're not initiating conversation with me. Therefore, I think that I'm doing something wrong. I can't see their facial expressions to see how they're looking at me. What if I am wearing something weird? What if I smell bad because I can't even smell myself? I had all reasonable concerns to have as a high schooler in high school. So, it made it really difficult to interact and to relate with people around me, to be honest, because everyone was on social

media - Snapchat, Instagram, and whatnot - talking about, like, "Oh, I drove here. I drove there. I watched this. I watched that." or, basically, stuff I couldn't relate to. They're talking about all the trivial things while, as a high schooler, I had all this happen to me, and no one really understood it. When I make a friend, I just can't go, like, "Oh, hey, I was shot by my father. That's why I'm blind." That makes people uncomfortable and stuff like that, so it made it really difficult.

Scott

So did they know the story then?

Ross

Yeah, I would tell a kid and it would eventually get around. I wouldn't say everyone knew, but a lot of people who are in my grade knew.

Scott

That's not the kind of thing you just hear and forget about it. You got to tell somebody.

Ross

Yeah. As a result of this, I grew really bitter and depressed. I mentioned that I had depression but, really, a lot of it was caused by everything in high school just because I was getting more and more depressed over not being able to make friends. Back in high school, I thought people were ignoring me for some reason - I thought I was the problem. So, I grew bitter, depressed, and angry. Looking back now, it wasn't entirely my fault. All people have to do, I guess, is just approach me, say hi to me, and just give me a chance to actually be myself to not be seen as a blind person. So, yeah, you can pin the blame on everyone else. But, at the same time, I could have gone and asserted myself and be like, "Hey, I'm blind, but get over it. This is me. Let's be friends. Get to know me, please." I could have done that, but I didn't. I wanted everything handed to me.

Scott

Well, that's difficult for some sighted people too.

Ross

Yeah, exactly. That was mainly what I struggled with in high school. The whole issue, kind of, came to a head in my senior year when I gave my speech at XMO - I'm not sure if you want to talk about that or not. After that was really when people actually saw me for who I was.

Scott

Yeah. I will have a link to that because that was, kind of, the first time you told your story out loud, right?

Ross

That was specifically the very first time I had told my story out loud like that. Before that, it was really hard for me to say because I was in denial - I just had so many pent-up emotions over what had happened to me and everything that was happening to me.

Scott

Yeah, I watched that video and it's just incredible. I mean, you have a natural gift for speaking - I'm sure other people have told you that as well. So, I'll put a link to that so that people can watch that. That was your first time and, obviously, you weren't using any notes.

Ross

No. That speech was honestly straight from the heart.

Scott

Oh, I could tell. It touched the people in that room. How many people were you speaking to in that room?

Ross

Maybe, like, 40 or 50.

Scott

Okay. Man, you had that room - you had their attention. Could you tell that even though you couldn't see their faces? With your other senses, could you tell, "Wow, these people are really listening to me"?

Ross

Yeah. I mean, I definitely heard, like, people sniffing and whatnot. Honestly, at the moment, none of that was really on my mind. I just desperately wanted to, kind of, convey to anyone that was listening about how I was feeling and reach out to someone that just needed a friend. So, yeah, I could tell that people were upset, but it wasn't on my mind until afterward, when everyone was, like, crying. I was like, "Oh, geez. Did I do something wrong?"

Scott

No, you did something really right. I want to ask you how your other senses have improved because you always hear that, when somebody goes blind, the other senses somehow become drastically more in tune. One thing I was surprised by was - something you said, maybe, on your YouTube channel - that you actually had to wear earplugs after you lost your sight. Can you talk about how that worked?

Ross

Yeah. They do say, "If you lose a sense, others get better." Honestly, I don't know if that's true. If you think I'd be curious enough to do research on it, I got other things to worry about. Like, my senses are here - that's all I have to be grateful for. After I went blind, I kind of developed a mistrust of adults. Then, I also developed, like, really sensitive ears. Why did I develop sensitive ears? I don't know that. It? Do you think of it as, like, "Oh, your brain knows that you have no sight, so it's going to, like, pump up the power on the ears." I don't know if that's how it works or if it was just very overwhelming because I had to use my hearing much, much more, all of a sudden. The fact is, yeah, I had to wear earplugs. At first, I had to wear earplugs everywhere I went. Then, I had to wear them when things got loud even until now. These days, I still keep earplugs with me just because loud concerts or just loud noises, in general, hurt my ears. Then, I also keep the earplugs these days not because I'm scared of the sound or because some sounds hurt my ears, but mainly because I want to preserve my hearing so that I don't lose it when I'm older and become deaf and blind.

Scott

That's very smart because you depend on your hearing so much now.

Ross

Yeah, I depend on it. I can't risk losing it.

Scott

Right. How would you rate the difficulty of learning to read Braille?

Ross

Very, very, very, very, very, very difficult. Braille is not just, like, this means A, this means B, this means C. Braille is like, this means C, or this means the word 'Can', or this means the letter or the number 3, or this means a colon, or this means a dash, or this means the letter com. Like, that's how complicated it can be.

Scott

So, one thing can mean all of those things?

Ross

All those things, yes.

Scott

Okay, I'm lost now.

Ross

Yeah. So, whenever I have friends say "Oh, you should teach me Braille", I'm not going to force that upon you because it's difficult. Braille is very difficult because there's a language for reading on paper, there's a language for reading math and, technically, there's a language for reading on computers - but that's more of semantics. Like, there's a different language for actually reading math, and that's called Nemeth - that's a whole other code of Braille. So, yeah, I would say it's really difficult, and that was just reading. Writing is a lot easier because you'd just use a Braille writer, and it looks like a really old-fashioned typewriter, except the keys are just meant for Braille, but it's still the same - you roll in the paper as a bell and stuff like that, and the Braille is on it.

Scott

For using a computer, I assume everything on the screen is just turned into audio.

Ross

Yes. Fun fact, right now, I'm a software engineering major in college. When I was a kid, my mom had been told by several people. They were like, "Hey, look. Technology is the future. You need to get your kid learning how to use a computer. It's possible." So, my mom tried, but I fought her - like, tooth and nail - at every turn. I did not want to use a computer until I was, probably, in 9th grade when I started really diving into computers. So, that road was just another handful of things I had to learn when I became blind. Honestly, looking back, it wasn't me learning how to use a computer as a blind person, it was just me learning how to use a computer because, when you're sighted, you can see a big red button or icon to click to launch this program. There are a lot more visual cues. So, when you're using your screen reading software on a computer, you have to read all the text because, as I said, a lot of text is associated with a picture. So, while you're clicking on an icon, I have to read the text and then click on that. I'm trying to think of an example. Like, I didn't know what a start menu was or I didn't know what a task manager was. So, I had to relearn all of, I guess, the technical terms of what everything was while sighted people could go Ctrl+Delete. Do you see what I'm saying? So, the difficult part was actually learning how to use a computer because, when you're blind, you're forced to learn all of the keyboard commands for the screen reading software, as well as the actual computer because you can't use a mouse.

Scott

Yeah, I can definitely see that. And you're really into video games as well, right?

Ross

Oh, yeah. As I said, my brother was an outdoor type while I was an inside video game type.

Scott

I'm not a gamer myself, but I can see people playing games - everything is visual. You're running through a room, running across a field, looking for people to shoot, or whatever you're doing. How do you do that if you can't see the screen?

Ross

That's kind of the whole barrier between the sighted and blind world. It's not that, as a blind person, I am different from you - a sighted person. The difference between us is that, literally, our senses causes us to look at the world in a completely different way. When you're watching a video game, all you're seeing is the video. I guess, when I wear a pair of headphones, based on how the game is programmed, coded, created, developed, or however you want to say it, I'm able to hear where the audio is coming from, I'm able to hear if it's in front of me, behind me, to the left, or to the right. It goes the same with movies. If you wear a pair of headphones in the movies, they designed the audio spatially so that you can hear where everything is coming from. So, through that, that's how I've learned to play video games. Another thing is just memorizing all the menus and sounds. I have to memorize all the menus. Then, I also have to memorize all the sounds, similar to how people memorize all the visual cues. I have to remember, "That sound does this, that sound does that. Therefore, this does that." Stuff like that. So, it's just a whole different process.

Scott

Can you tell us about the experience of getting your first guide dog?

Ross

Yeah, for sure. My guide dog's name is Dixie. She's a black lab. It's actually her birthday, I think, next week.

Scott

Happy birthday, Dixie! How old is she gonna be?

Ross

She's gonna be five. I think her birthday is on the 3rd - I'd have to check her papers. I was born sighted, walked around with my eyes, and then I went blind and learned how to use a cane. Then, when I turned 18, I flew up to New Jersey to get my first guide dog.

Scott

That had to be pretty exciting.

Ross

Yeah, it was. Back then, I was not very to guide dogs like most people were. So, when I was flying up there, I was like, "Oh, I want a big German Shepherd. I want to name it something badass." Then, I got up there and they were like, "This is your guide dog, Dixie. She's a black lab, and she's 50 pounds." I was like, "I didn't fly up here to get this dinky little dog." No, the type

of dog doesn't matter, the size of the dog doesn't matter. She's a really smart dog. Those dogs went through rigorous training when they're bred and trained to be guide dogs. So, when I got Dixie, it was like learning how to use a cane all over again, to be honest, because it's completely different from using a cane. As you would probably expect, I had trust issues. I've had trust issues ever since what happened to me. So, for me to have to put my trust in a literal dog was hard for me to do. Sometimes, it's still hard for me to do, but she's honestly as much as a therapy dog to me as she is a seeing-eye dog. It's great having her around. People think that, when you have a guide dog, it's all sunshine and rainbows. Sometimes, yeah. Sometimes, she'll make mistakes. Sometimes, I'll make mistakes. Sometimes, I have to train her to do certain things. It helps my responsibility and I like the companionship - I really do. There are not many moments in your life that you will remember really well, but I remember that, if I really do end up liking guide dogs, I'm gonna be getting more and more guide dogs as I get older. This is my very, very first guide dog and it was just a really cool experience. They gave her to me. I don't know if you saw it, but I have that video of me meeting her for the first time.

Scott

Oh, I haven't seen that.

Ross

Oh, yeah. I got the whole thing on video. I have, like, a whole little montage on my channel of them bringing her up to me, me petting her. Then, I have a few videos of, like, them showing me the basic commands and me just training with her and stuff like that because I've worked there for, like, 3 weeks. It's not like they would just give you the dog and then you would just go. There are a lot of things you guys have to practice. They gave her to me and I took her into my room. The whole point of the first day was, literally, to bond with your dog. So, the whole day, I was just playing with Dixie. I was like, "Wow, this dog is gonna be with me for the next many years."

Scott

How long have you had her now?

Ross

I got her a little bit before she was 2. So, I've had her for around 3 years now.

Scott

I have two dogs. The relationship between a human and their pet - especially a dog - in my opinion, is really special. Boy, it's got to be 10 times the connection that you have with Dixie.

Ross

Yeah. Sometimes, if I'm at the pool or something and I have to tie her down while I get in the water or wherever I am tired down, my girlfriend would be like, "Oh, she's watching you like a hawk. She would just keep an eye on me wherever I was."

Scott

Well, she's responsible for you. Alright, you mentioned the pool. How did you get interested in swimming?

Ross

I started swimming at first just because I wanted a sport to do. Before I went blind, I did soccer. After I went blind, I obviously couldn't do regular soccer anymore. So, when I was at the Florida

School for the Deaf and Blind, my mom had convinced me to sign up for the swim team. I started in 8th grade and that's pretty much how I got started. I kind of swam throughout high school. I didn't really take it that seriously at that time, if I'm to be honest. I just, kind of, swim seasonally and just did it to stay active.

Scott

Well, you eventually became captain of the swim team, right?

Ross

Yeah. In my senior year at Bishop Schneider, I became captain of the swim team. If I remember correctly, there's a guy's captain and the girl's captain - I was the guy's captain.

Scott

Well, for competitive swimming, obviously, you have to swim in a lane. Do you just do that intuitively? Do you ever drift out of your lane? How do you do that?

Ross

There are a lot of different philosophies and techniques. Essentially, you kind of have to wing it. It varies from stroke to stroke and person to person. What I usually do is, if I'm swimming, I would mainly try to trail on the lane line or the wall or wherever I am, and swim the race. Then, they have people called tappers. Basically, there are giant poles with, like, a soft little ball on the end of them. They will tap you when you're supposed to flip and push off the wall.

Scott

So whoever's tapping you knows the exact millisecond so that you know when to flip over and push off.

Ross

Well, you would think.

Scott

They mess up sometimes?

Ross

Yeah, they do. This is, like, a controversial topic among blind people because some blind people feel that there should be more standards as far as tappers. As of right now, you would literally meet them at the beginning of the day before your race.

Scott

I was picturing this... The tapper would be your coach. So, you would have that connection ahead of time.

Ross

Unfortunately, my biggest struggle while I'm racing is trusting my tapper to touch me at the right time because not everyone likes to be tapped at the right time. Some people like being tapped right when they're supposed to flip. Some people like being tapped 1 or 2 strokes out - it varies. I don't want to make it seem all bad or anything but, generally, you tend to see the same coaches or volunteers at the meets that you go to. At this point, I have, like, a group of five or so people that I know I'll see at the meet. I'll just go, "Hey, can you tap me for this race?" And they're like, "Oh, I got you. You like it two strokes out, right?" And I would say, "Yep."

Scott

Yeah. You're different from a sighted swimmer because part of your performance is dependent on this other person.

Ross

Yeah, absolutely. You're 100% correct. That's the part that rubs you the wrong way.

Scott

Yeah. Right now, you're in Colorado at the Olympic and Paralympic Training Center. Can you explain what are the Paralympics?

Ross

Okay. Thank you for asking me. A lot of people don't know the difference. The biggest difference - and probably one of the only differences - is that the Olympics is for normal people - people are probably gonna get mad at me for saying this.

Scott

I'm glad I didn't say that.

Ross

Then, the Paralympics is for people with physical disabilities. Let me say right off the bat - a lot of people think that the Paralympics is a Special Olympics. The Paralympics is just as professional and competitive as the Olympics. The Special Olympics is an organization for people with cognitive disabilities - they're completely different. So, when I say that the Paralympics and Olympics are pretty much equal in every way, I'm telling the truth. After the Olympics, the Paralympics would happen after a couple of weeks at the same location. It's just unfortunate because the Paralympics don't get as much media attention, but that's sort of another hot topic issue. However - I don't want to say the majority - in many other countries, the Paralympics are very popular. Most people in the United States probably never heard of the Paralympics. Over in Europe, it's huge. Back in London in 2012, a lot of my teammates who went there were telling me, "Oh man, yeah, the Paralympic ceremony was so much bigger than the Olympic ceremony. They had Jay Z and Rihanna there while Olympics had nothing."

Scott

So, it's kind of the other way around over there.

Ross

Yeah. I think, specifically, in the UK, it's the other way around, because I believe the first Paralympic competition was held in the UK. Generally, the Paralympics is almost or, if not, just as popular as the Olympics in other countries. As far as how I got into the Paralympics, after high school, I was like, "Okay, well, swimming was done. I'm going off to college." My mom was like, "Hey, have you heard of the Paralympics?" It's almost a shame but, at that time, I was like, "Oh, I don't know what that is. That sounds dumb." So, she told me and I was like, "Yeah, I'm on the fence about it. I'll think about it." Well, I didn't decide until, maybe, a year and a half after I was done with my high school career and go, "Okay, yeah. I'll start training for this. Why not?" My mom was the main person to actually get me to do it. She didn't exactly pressure me - I don't want to put it like that - but she encouraged me to really try and just give it a go.

At that time, I hadn't been in the pool for, like, a year and a half. At that time, I was, like, "Okay, well. How am I going to get back into this? We don't know how any of this works. How do I go to a meet? How do I become eligible for the Paralympics?" Well, we found out that I had to swim in a Paralympic meet to become, like, I guess, part of a circuit or part of the Paralympics. So, we actually have to go to the meet that was going on in Charlotte, North Carolina - where I went blind. So, we had to basically train me for that meet. This was, like, August of 2017. I was at the University of North Florida.

We had to hire a coach, but we could really only afford, like, 2 days a week. So, that's what I had to do. My mom and I were, like, "Well, we can't afford this. This isn't feasible. You're not going to become successful if you only swim 2 days a week." So, we looked at other options. That's where we found the Olympic and Paralympic Training Center up in Colorado. We found out that I could get all my food and training and housing for free. So, she was, like, "Well, do you want to do this?" We determined that they probably wouldn't accept me until I actually had some time under my belt. So, we flew up to Charlotte, North Carolina, a few months later and that's where I swam.

I think I did the 53 and the 100 freestyle. So, I made it into that merging team. What that means is, like... there are different tiers of teams you can be on in the Paralympics. At that time, they had National A-Team, National B-Team, and Emerging Team. They're all based on times. If you made this time or faster, you're on the Emerging Team. So, it kind of signifies, "Okay, this athlete is getting faster." Then, National B was when you start to get paid and your time got even faster. It's like, "Okay, this athlete is really worth looking into." Then, National A is, like, top at the top - they're most likely going to games and stuff like that. So, when I was there, I made Emerging Team and I was, like, "Okay, cool. I made a team." Well, I applied to the training center in December and they got back to me. I was accepted and, literally, flying out there within, like, three weeks. I dropped all my classes for the spring semester at UNF, packed up, moved out to Colorado, and began my training there. Ever since I've been there, I've been training pretty much 24/7, traveling the world, and competing for our country.

Scott

How is the training center free? Who pays for this?

Ross

That's actually a really good question. Training Center is actually paid for by - let's see if I remember it correctly - I believe, the training center. The training center is a nonprofit and is funded by donations. However, in most countries, if I'm informed correctly, most of their Olympic and Paralympic activities funds come from taxes. I was talking about that with my friends and they were like, "That'd be really cool. We're funded by taxes." But as soon as people see, like, tax, they're like, "Oh, well, we don't need it. Why do we have to fund the Olympics and Paralympics?" So yeah, we're all funded by donations. It's the same with the Olympics as well - it's not just the Paralympics. Up until just recently - like, last January - the training center that we're at was just called the Olympic Training Center. Now, it's called the Olympic and Paralympic Training Center in efforts to, like, add more cohesion to the Olympics and Paralympics because, I guess - the Paralympic Committee also knows that - it's not very fair for the Paralympics to, kind of, not have as much coverage. So, a lot of people try to do as much as they can to spread the word about the Paralympics because a lot of people argue that, like, "Oh, well, Paralympic swimmers do just as much as - if not more than - the Olympic swimmers because of their disability.

Overall, it's the Olympic and Paralympic Training Center. So, we have a cafeteria, a state-of-the-art weight room, a pool, and everything you really need. Michael Phelps, Nathan Adrian, and Katie Ledecky have stayed. I haven't met Michael Phelps, but I've seen Nathan Adrian and Katie Ledecky on the regular. Like, I swam in the pool with them, but it's kind of, like, almost normal now. A lot of top athletes come through, but they're just there. They do the same as you and you're doing the same as them - you're just trying to get better. So, it's not like there are paparazzi here. You, kind of, just nod and keep going because we're all just busting our asses trying to get better.

Scott

So, the celebrity aspect wears off pretty quickly, right?

Ross

Oh, yeah, definitely.

Scott

So you're training for the 2020 Summer Paralympics?

Ross

Yes, I am training for the 2020 Summer Paralympics that will be taking place in Tokyo right after the Olympics.

Scott

Man, you got to be excited about that!

Ross

Oh, yeah, I am. In fact, my mom used to live in Japan when she was a kid for, I think, like, 6 years - I want to say something like that - because my grandfather used to work for General Motors, so they did a lot of traveling. She used to live in Tokyo, so she's really excited to go there as well because she, kind of, gets to see places that she hasn't seen in years. So yeah, it's kind of cool. After the games and everything, we're most likely going to stay there and go on a vacation. She's going to show me around Tokyo and where she grew up and everything.

Scott

That'd be awesome.

Ross

Yeah, yeah.

Scott

Good. Well, we'll all be watching for you then when that happens.

Ross

Yeah, definitely.

Scott

All right, I got just a few more questions. We've been going on here for a while and I want to be mindful of your time, but this discussion and the whole thing is just fascinating to me. Do you have vision when you're dreaming?

Ross

No, kind of. Part of the reason why I have my YouTube channel is because I like to address very popular questions like these. So, for me, it's complicated because it's like, "Well, do you see in your dreams? How do blind people see?" So, I have to explain it a little bit. What I see right now isn't just black - it's all the colors that I used to remember. So, if I imagine something, I would, kind of, see it in my mind's eye, and that's kind of how it feels when I dream. I'm not actually seeing it, but my brain is - my brain feels like it's seeing something. Does that make sense?

Scott

Yeah. Well, that's kind of the way a sighted person dreams too, right? We're not physically seeing something - it's just all in our minds.

Ross

Yeah, essentially. So, that's kind of how it feels for me.

Scott

What should sighted people know when encountering a blind person? I'll tell you what prompted this question. As I watched one of your videos, one of the things you said is, "If you see a blind person and you think they might need help or whatever, don't go up and grab them." Yes, that seems like common sense to me.

Ross

Oh, you would think.

Scott

Do people actually do that, though?

Ross

Yes, on a regular basis. I'm a pretty big guy. So, due to the fact that people do that to me, I can only imagine how many other blind people smaller than me would have that happen to them. It happens - I don't want to say daily - weekly for sure - people will try to grab you and try to tell you where to go and whatnot. If there's a message I can send out, it's just that blind people are just normal people, although they just can't see. Like, how would you feel if you woke up in the middle of the night in your house, went down to get a glass of water, and then something grabbed you? That would, like, scare the crap out of you. So, you just want to extend the same kind of courtesies to a blind person. It's okay to walk up and ask them if they need help. If they do, just say, "Okay, how would you like me to lead you?" It's pretty standard to have a blind person just hold on to your elbow and then you walk them down. Some people are different, so it's always worth asking, "Hey, how do you want me to lead you?"

Scott

That's a good question. It's good to remember that.

Ross

Yeah, definitely. It's not as complicated as I may make it to be right now. Just because you see a blind person go "Oh, they need help", a lot of times, they don't. I'll be walking along, doing my own thing, knowing exactly where I'm going, and then someone would come to try to help me. Then, I would say, "Oh, no. Thank you." but they would be persistent. Then, I would say "No,

thank you.” and then get disoriented because they distracted me. Well, guess what? Now, I need their help, but I already said “No, thank you.”

Scott

You've already refused it...

Ross

Yeah, exactly. It makes things so much more complicated. So, if you see a blind person that is looking confident, I mean, stop them if you want to have a conversation with them, but don't stop them if you want to try to help them but they don't need to help. All of it is basically common courtesy. The big thing is don't grab people - it's rude - blind or sighted, really.

Scott

What would you change about the world, in general, to make it better for blind people?

Ross

I say this a lot when people ask me this, but it's really true. 2019, right now, is the time to be a blind person because, before 2019, each year before has been harder and harder for blind people. Back in the 1900s, before all this kind of technology existed, blind people used to have to carry around, like, 50-pound Braille writers whenever they wanted to type something. So, I literally have technology at my fingertips, so being blind now has actually been very easy compared to most blind people in the past, so I'm grateful for that. As a philosophy minor, I'm just like, “What's the point of asking? What do I want to have better in the world when what I have right now is great?” Like, I can say anything. I wish I had a million dollars, or I wish that everything was adapted for blind people. Everything is not adapted for blind people, but we're on the right track. So, if I can have one thing, I would just say “Speed it up. Let's keep the progress going.” Humans as a whole - all countries, not just America - have just been really progressive in the past 10 years alone with disabilities as a whole. I just feel that, these days, a lot more people are more aware of stuff like that.

Scott

I love that answer.

Ross

Yeah. Actually, there's one thing I'll add to that - and it's a little bit of a tangent. When I recently went to Peru to compete in a meet there - the meet was okay-- the meet was called the Pan American Games - it's like a miniature Olympic Games. We had a village built for us. We had a pool built for us. Like, everything was built brand new for this event, so it's a pretty big meet. Well, when they built everything, they made sure that everything was accessible for all disabilities. I have a video on my YouTube channel of me touring the Olympic village. Basically, there were wheelchair ramps - everything was wheelchair accessible. They also had - I've never seen this before, which I thought was really cool - these yellow strips running everywhere, like, to the elevators, to the cafeteria, to all doors, everything. It turns out that I can put my cane on those yellow strips and they will guide me and make sure that I'm on, like, the middle of the path and not walk off the edge and don't get lost. So, it's a way for blind person to trail their cane and get around easier.

Scott

How does the strip do that? Does it have a ridge in the middle?

Ross

Yeah, it has a couple of ridges where you just place your cane in it. So, yeah, stuff like that is really cool. If anything, more inventions like that could really change the world for the better because I could see them being really useful in many situations.

Scott

Oh, yeah. If you can snap your fingers and get your sight back, would you do it?

Ross

That's really a tough question. I've gotten a lot of things in life through hard work. So, if I get my sight back, like, I don't really work for it. If I get my sight back, what if I end up regretting it? What if being blind is who I really should be? So, it's really hard to say. That possibility is almost real already just because of all the advancements in technology.

Scott

So that might be a real question you'll have to answer someday, then.

Ross

It may be. Right now, I would say yes just because I've lived my life blind long enough to know what it's like to be blind. So, if I get my sight back, that'd be great. At the same time, I've gotten used to being blind to where it's not like I'm miserable or anything. It's not like I'm unhappy being sighted. With all the technology that is coming out, people always send me links, like, "Oh, have you seen this surgery?" But for me, it's a bit more complicated because both of my nerves are severed. It's not, like, something that happened from a disease. Then, my left eye is not even there anymore. So, are we talking about restoring nerves - because, then, I would only be able to see out of one eye - or talking about replacing both eyes - because, then, I'd be able to see out of both?

Scott

Yeah, that's an interesting question. I'm picturing a sighted person - in their mind, if they suddenly became blind and if they could snap their fingers and get their sight back, would they do it immediately? The answer, obviously, is, "Yes, of course!" But you've got a whole different perspective on that.

Ross

Yeah. I mean, it's like, either adapt or adopt. Humans are really good at adapting - like, we adapt to things every single day of our lives. When you think of the more extreme, you're like, "There's no way I can ever do that" when in fact, you can.

Scott

What's your long-term plan? You mentioned that you're a software engineering major. What are you thinking about for a career?

Ross

Yeah, I mentioned software engineering and I've also mentioned gaming a lot. Well, I kind of want to combine both of those. I want to be able to make video games accessible for people with disabilities. That's already a movement that's going on right now. A lot of companies are working on making their video games accessible. Microsoft is, kind of, leading that right now. So, I really want to, like, get a degree in software engineering, join Microsoft, and help with things that help with making their products blind-friendly or for other disabilities. I also, kind of,

want to keep sharing my story and trying to inspire and motivate other people just because of everything that's going on these days. People need some sort of motivation or hope.

Scott

Oh, absolutely. Your story is so inspiring. I mean, there are people that make a living just going around and giving inspirational motivational speeches.

Ross

Yeah. Ultimately, I have my interest and I have what I want to do as a job. Ultimately, I want to do as much as I can to put myself in front of people as much as possible so that I can, like, help those people in the best way I can. Sometimes, I feel like we all just need to, kind of, slow down a little bit. If I'm able to just share my story or do what I do to inspire some people somehow, then it's a cause I would take.

Scott

You're definitely doing that. Okay, Ross, one final question. Have you forgiven your father?

Ross

Yeah. I would say, I have. I feel like a lot of people assume that I personally took what my dad did to me like, "He didn't like me or something like that." I realized that he was most likely mentally ill. So, he could have been a good person if he had therapy. We don't know. It's like what Confucius said, "Holding on to a hot coal is, like, trying to burn the other person." So, there's no point holding on to a grudge. I say that but I still hold on to grudges - like, that's one of my flaws. It just weighs you down more than necessary.

Scott

And it happened a long time ago...

Ross

Yeah, it happened a long time ago - a little over 13 years, I think, or something like that.

Scott

So you're 21 now?

Ross

Yeah, I'm 21. So, everything my dad did became, like, "Okay, let's move on with life." At the same time, like, time heals wounds to an extent. Sometimes, you just got to move on to an extent. I'm not saying to, like, just forget about whatever traumatic thing you went through and you'll be all better, but time helps - it really does.

Scott

Ross, I appreciate your time. This is just an unbelievable and very inspiring story. For this episode, the show notes will have links to everything we talked about here. You have a YouTube channel and you're also on Facebook and Instagram.

Ross

Yeah, I have Twitter as well. I'm basically on most social.

Scott

Okay. So we'll have links to all that as well as the link to - if I can find it - the Investigation Discovery Show that you had mentioned and, of course, the XMO speech that you gave, your email address Rossaminor@gmail.com. We will link to all that if anyone wants to get in touch with you. There might be a blind person listening to this right now who would say, "Hey, I would like to talk to Ross and see what he thinks about this. I have a question or something." So, once again, thanks for letting us in on your amazing story.

Ross

Yeah, I appreciate it. Thank you so much for having me.

Scott

Thanks for listening. My goal for each episode is to bring you people and stories that you just won't find on other podcasts. If you'd like to discuss this episode or previous episodes with other listeners, you can do that at our private Facebook group at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook). I hope to see you in there! And if you'd like to support the show, you can do that at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/support). And I'll see you in 2 weeks when we'll once again be asking the question, What Was That Like?