

Episode #221

Surprised By What They Can Do with Mike Porteous

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[00:00:00] **Susan:** today I am delighted to welcome Mike Porteous to Life Beyond the Numbers. Mike, you're so welcome.

[00:00:08] **Mike:** So much. I feel very honored to be here. Thank you.

[00:00:11] **Susan:** That's nice to hear. And this is my first recording of 2026. So let's see what this year brings. And one of the things I like to think about listeners is I imagine that when I'm in conversation with somebody like Mike and I will be today, that maybe you are someone who's sitting beside us in a restaurant or a cafe.

You overhear us and you just want to keep listening in. But something I've been thinking about Mike, is how do we want our listeners to feel? Of this episode, because that's another dimension. It's not just that they listen in, but what's the feeling we'd like to evoke?

[00:01:01] **Mike:** Hmm. Wow. This is quite a deep question and I'm going to. It might sound like I'm evading it, dodging it at first, because I kind of think, it would be a bit presumptuous of me to say, oh, I can affect how someone feels or thinks or what they take. but putting that aside, I'll say a bit of the work I do and then what I want when I'm in a conversation or taking part in a webinar or listening to a podcast, whatever that might, might take us.

So, the work I do, I'm a sports coach, an endurance sports coach. And I place a big, big emphasis on feeling how I'm feeling as a coach when I'm stood there with someone or with a group of people. how I can create a space where I just feel like the coaching is gonna flow, right?

how they, come to trust in the relationship, hopefully. As well as how can I help them feel at their very best, that they're most excited and ready for whatever hairy, scary challenge they've, come to me for support for. So I put a big emphasis on, on, a kind of layered level of feeling.

But again, there's something. To avoid a, I can't just by telling someone, oh, this is how you should feel, you should feel confident. and my work is all around confident and sometimes the way that gets talked about and thought about can be rather judgmental. I think. You



know, you really should be confident. Why aren't you? This is something to fix. say to yourself the following.

Rather than, my approach is sort of trying to get at, well, what's the underlying feeling there that I want this person to get really attuned to? And if I can coach in a way where someone is really attuned to what's happening in their mind and body as one, not as two separate things, then I think, well, I've found it. It's just magical, the effect that people have. They would kind of find themselves at their best. they go on to do things where they're, the phrase I like to use is, they're surprised by what they can do. that's a bit of a rambling thing about how I think of it in relation to my work with athletes, and what I'm hoping them to feel, it's more how I'm hoping them, they can be really attuned to what's going on for them and for me to, be attuned to what's happening for me as well as what's happening for them. And then the second bit, I suppose, thinking about a conversation that I'm listening into on a podcast or if I'm taking part in a webinar, I don't necessarily want to come out with a kind of a to-do list or I really should improve on this and that, and I must practice this. and of course, a lot of stuff that's out there. It kind of races us down that route. So what are you gonna do differently, Mike? But actually I want to come away with a sense of almost a sort of stillness where I can just quietly think through for myself, well, what have I got from that? How does it change my thinking? How do I want to be, Something about a calmness and a composure where you can be open to just thinking in a different way or seeing yourself in a different kind of place. yeah, so maybe, that's what some of your listeners will get to. I don't know, but, I can't presume that.

Oid.

[00:05:24] **Susan:** I think it's helped me already though, because it's also the interaction between us, isn't it? And there is. the questioner and the answerer, let's say. But at the end of the day, there's two people here, you and I having a conversation, and there's this space between us. And what you said there reminds me that if I bring a frenetic energy into a conversation like this, it'll go in one direction. But by bringing more of a calm and composed. Stillness. I'm attuning and we are attuning, and that will result in a different conversation.

[00:06:21] **Mike:** Yeah. And similarly, if I can take that kind of openness to an encounter with someone I'm coaching, so I don't go in thinking to myself, oh, these are the things that they must do. these are the things that we must fix. If I can go in with more of an openness, yeah, it just seems I end up feeling much more rewarded.

I end up feeling much more like I'm being true to myself. Hopefully the person of coaching also has a sense of, you know, yeah, some, someone's listening here, someone's seeing me for who I am and is, is there to help me. Rather than instructing them, which always implicitly has an element of, oh, you're doing it wrong, I'm the holder of what's right.

yeah.



[00:07:15] **Susan:** We have a lot of those people in the world, the holders of what is right. So I, I think, that that job is full.

[00:07:27] **Mike:** Yes, but how tiring it must be for these people to, to feel like, you know exactly what's needed here. My goodness. that must be tiring. That's a weight to carry.

[00:07:44] **Susan:** I think it is. 'cause I think. Look, I don't know because, well, I think for a while I was probably a bit like that, where, I'm doing it the right way, so you need to come with me, and then you realize that you've lost everybody somewhere along the line. So I do think I, I adapted that, and, and I think.

There are certain things like when you are doing say, financial statements, which is where I would've spent my time, there's a grimace from Mike. there is a right way to get things to balance numbers require precision and specificity, but that, that doesn't lend itself well to, to everybody I think has their own specificity or precision, and it's our jobs to tune into that and not make them tune into our way, which is not necessarily the right way because there is no right way. Surprise.

So, Mike, you've written, as I was saying to you before we, we started recording probably my favorite, if not favorite book of last year, and I was wondering why that was as well. And I suppose it's a bit like what we started talking about. It's the feeling and you tapped into your words, helped me tap in more to myself and what I think and write about, and you articulated stuff that I haven't yet, and for me that's the joy of reading or listening is that someone helped you further the thinking or the conversations or deepen perhaps those things.

And your book is called Beyond Belief. The art of confidence centered coaching. And before we go into confidence centered coaching as such, when you started to write this book, Mike, I mean it's clear it comes from your experience for sure, but did you know what would come out through this writing?

[00:10:23] **Mike:** no. Probably not. No. It came about in an odd way, I suppose. it came about by a professor wagging his finger at me. Steven Rolnick, who is one of the co-founders of Creators, the motivational interviewing. I got to know him and he was reading some of the blog posts though, right?

And then he started, he wiped his finger. He said, you gotta get this stuff down in a book. Which gave a, really nice impetus. in one sense he was pushing at an open door. I had been thinking about it, but not in a sense of, oh, this will make me famous. Or, or even that the ideas are beautifully formed and they're just ready to go.



It felt very much like a process of. of making real, stuff that had been going on in my head for ages. I think the process of writing really, certainly for me, it helps just keep digging down to, yeah, but what is it that's really going on here? what do I want to say? Without even getting to the point of the next question, I suppose of, well, how do I share that with other people?

How might they receive this? yeah. So I don't think I had a neatly mapped out path. and I, people. Kept telling me you don't, don't write a book. first you need to get in touch with a publisher and, give them a proposal and then off you go. And I finished writing at the time, I started looking for a, a publisher, but I kind of, I, I just knew that, or my sense was.

I was very, very unlikely to find any publisher, certainly not in the sports world who would have an interest. I felt like if I, I'd just have to get it down on paper and present it almost that someone somewhere would say, ah, yeah, no, we'll go with this. And that actually was my experience with, with Alison Jones that, Practical Inspiration publishing.

I tried approaching lots of different publishers, got nowhere, got turned off by several, by, what they asked for, realizing I didn't know how to make the case. Allison at first said, you know, oh, nice idea, but it's not for us. and it was only when she actually read a manuscript that, fortunately she said, no, no, we'd, really like to publish this.

yeah.

[00:13:15] **Susan:** Again, no right way. So, everyone told you, oh, you can't do this and you should do that, and, and yet you followed your own. You stayed true to yourself. And how, how, like. Those voices in your head, for example, or those people telling you the experts steering your own course, requires belief, self-belief, self-confidence, whatever.

how did you grapple with that, Mike? Or did it even become an issue?

[00:13:52] **Mike:** right. I don't think it was so much my own self-belief. It was more, I'm just so convinced to the point of obsession that the, way in which we are taught to be sports coaches. it's just so limited. And the, the people we look to as the, like, the pinnacle of coaches, I mean, sure there's some super impressive people, but that's not the model.

I've continued to feel really deeply there's a better way of being a coach. It starts with, just that very word of the being rather than the doing. it's back to the stuff about, you know, being really attuned to who I am, what I bring, how can I create a space where, both me and the people I'm coaching have an easiness and a fluency about what we're all doing.

And that's not the stuff that you are taught, in qualifications or, training courses and in the sports where people would talk a lot about, the coach's philosophy. But for, a lot of people, I



think it stays at a rather superficial level. Been a bit harsh about it, it's all about the tactics, you know, oh, our philosophy is, press hard or keep going, rather than this is me, that my philosophy comes from who I am and the presence that I want to bring to each encounter.

[00:15:37] **Susan:** That's where I want to go is presence. 'cause actually something you right that we feel the absence of confidence far more. Then we do the presence. So I'd love to understand that a little bit more, Mike, because I think this relates far beyond sports coaching, and I know that's your, specialism expertise, your work, but I see so many parallels with people in offices or any of us in our normal day-to-day lives.

[00:16:14] **Mike:** Yeah. Yeah. yeah. Basically the idea is a bit, in some ways, ironic or paradoxical for someone who's writing about confidence centered coaching. I don't believe there is a thing called confidence. If we think of it as a thing, a thing that some people have and some don't, or a thing that you build up and gets taken away.

I think a far more helpful way of thinking is to, in a sense, to go the layers below to what's really going on for someone see, and where does it come from? I was thinking about this that, many, many years ago, I used to be quite a good runner. I would have people come up, before a race, very, very excited oh, Mike, you are gonna, you are gonna win this, aren't you? nowadays people say you're gonna smash it.

So it's as if they're assuming that there's this, not just an ability, but there's this, for want of a better word, there's a confidence there or what I'm, now going to produce in this race. But I had no idea what was going on for me. And it actually, I found it very distancing because I wasn't feeling that.

for sure I was kind of thinking, oh wow, I might have a chance here. But, but I was also feeling a, a deep nervousness. I could feel it in my stomach, in my heart, a coldness right through my body. plus an excitement though as well, you know, think, wow, how lucky am I, I've actually made it to the start line injury free. How brilliant.

When I started trying to delve into the issues more around confidence, I thought, almost as a principle, we had no idea what's going on for someone. No matter, even if, they might look super confident, they might even say those words, but actually we have no idea what's really going on for them.

Again, on, on a more kind of positive side, if I can orientate my coaching in a way where I help people get to a particular kind of mix of deeper feelings, which can chat through if, if that's helpful, then yeah, it becomes something that they, that belongs in them. Yeah.



[00:19:07] **Susan:** So that absence you're speaking to is a feeling you have in yourself. And I'm not saying you, but any of us would have in ourselves because I used to get told, oh, you look so confident.

[00:19:21] **Mike:** Yeah.

[00:19:22] **Susan:** And you're like, so what? Like what's that got to do with anything? Plus all the other person is doing is projecting their own feelings onto me or lack of confidence or something going, I wish I was like Susan or whatever for whatever reason.

and so it's like judging a book by its cover, isn't it? it's the outward. Face of us that meets the world or body or stance, whatever, and how we feel inside. Is that the absence you're speaking to Mike?

[00:20:02] **Mike:** maybe, I'm thinking when I wrote about this paradox that I feel the absence, but not the presence of confidence. I was thinking maybe at a simpler level it's more. when it's not there in a, in a sense, wow. Do I feel it? it hurts. It's totally undermining. and I probably am going to use the words of, such and such and I lost all my confidence.

[00:20:36] **Susan:** You know, we're putting into those clear words. But I don't think the opposite is so true that when I'm feeling what might be labeled confidence, I'm actually feeling a mix of other things. Because again, confidence is not a thing. Maybe as shall I if I run through that. think so.

[00:21:06] **Mike:** yeah. So. those kind of mix of feelings. There's, three, there's always three things with me. I can't, I can't count beyond three. the first is, is an excitement, but it's not an excitement like, oh, I've got this made. I'm guaranteed the result of what I, that's called arrogance. That's not, that's not confidence. It's the way I express is I, or think about it is it's an excitement that I experience as a thrill, anticipation. I don't know what's gonna happen in this, this race, but wow, am I excited to be here? To be a part of what's gonna unfold? that's the kind of excitement that I want to, I want to really seek out and nurture and when I'm talking with an athlete about then preparing for an event, we've deliberately spend time thinking about, you know, wow. If you made it to the start line, what, what's that gonna be like? Especially in, my sports and endurance sports, a lot of people don't get that far, through injury or, anyway, so an excitement. This experience is thrilled anticipation.

And the second kind of part of the mix is to do with control. Which is where a lot of the kind of sports psychologists and other people who write about confidence would go, you know, control. As in I'm in charge of what's happening. I have agency, I, people would talk about self-determination theory. My actions will lead to this result. And yeah, there's a big element of that, but I think it's has to sit with its opposite, which is uncertainty of not knowing and knowing that, I don't know, being able to accept that there's some things that I have no control over whatsoever. I don't know what's gonna come up.



Again, especially in the stuff that I coach people for. All sorts of random things might happen, in a long triathlon or a big river swim mode. So we have to spend time not only preparing for those things that we know we can control, and being really rigorous about those, but at the same time acknowledging that yeah, stuff is gonna happen. and can we find back to, you know, how can I experience something which I think of as a. There's a calming composure.

And then the third element is all about fluency. That kind of in the moment magic where your head isn't full of instructions, it just happens. So people would talk about flow. that's a part of it I think. it just happens and we kind of lose and find ourselves in the moment. That's the way I like to think of it.

And again, I think we can coach around those things. Back to the thing about how attuned someone can be to what's happening to the effort that they're making, you know, the position that they're in, in the water or on the bike or whatever. And that's that lovely sense of a fluid movement. If we can really work on that as opposed to what I as an expert coach think is technically the perfect swim stroke, or sitting on the bike position or whatever. If I can help someone get to that point where again, they have that same kind of losing and finding themselves. Wow, that makes it so enjoyable as well as leading to amazing, results.

[00:25:29] **Susan:** As you're speaking to all of those, I am putting myself in my CrossFit gym that I go to a couple of times a week, or well as often as I can. And yesterday I was there, I was rowing on the rowing machine and like that when I'm, I would say at one with the machine. Even though it's effort, it's also effortless somehow, and I can feel myself come in and out of that state and it's really, it's not guaranteed to feel at one with something because the thinking gets in the way.

[00:26:17] **Mike:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah. No, that's very true. Something, particularly like swimming. Swimming is quite a technical thing to do, so it's very, very easy for someone to, for their heads to get totally cluttered up with, oh, my elbow needs to be here, or My hand should be coming in like this, or, I'm not breathing right, or, and the more you get down that route, the less at ease you're gonna be in the water. yeah, it's, it's hard. It's, I mean, I find it hard when I'm swimming, to do that thing of losing myself in the rhythm. just enjoying a sense of balance and, and fluidity through the water. but that's why I do it. That's why I keep going 'cause it's such a brilliant experience.

[00:27:15] **Susan:** Absolutely. And I relearnt to swim and I was in my twenties, mid to late twenties. And I mean, I grew up by the sea, so I was always swimming and, but I never, the breathing. And I think that's the other thing. And we haven't spoken about breath so much, but. Breath is so important to everything we do. Not just sport, but life in general and the swimming a a.



Again, the thing I most remember from those classes was if you try to fix everything in one go, you'll forget to breathe.

[00:27:54] **Mike:** yeah.

[00:27:55] **Susan:** And what that did for me was every time I go into the sea or the pool, the breathing is all I focus on, and then everything else follows because that's what's important.

[00:28:09] **Mike:** Yeah. Yeah. No, that's very true. Yeah.

[00:28:19] **Susan:** So fixing. Here are three things you need to do by the end of this class. So you're going to be the best at, and if you only do these five things,

going against the flow or the mainstream is like swimming upstream against a current. Is it Mike? I mean, 'cause you are saying things that other people aren't saying, so. How, have you come to terms with that yourself?

[00:28:56] **Mike:** well, there's more people now actually saying, there's a better way of coaching or, or operating in all sorts of professional areas. back to Steven Rolnick, he talks about the fixing reflex. so yeah, I don't feel I'm kind of on my own there. I'm very conscious that, again, in the sports world, the standing of a coach, the way they're thought of, people expect that coach to be the fixer, the one with the expert advice. I've got this vision of it.

I did a swim squad a couple of years ago. I remember one woman in particular, she got so angry with me, because I was coaching this particular way and she was saying to me, you know, but you got to tell me what I'm doing wrong. and I want to get a video of me swimming.

Point out to me what I'm doing wrong. And, no, it took me back a little bit, clearly at that point in her view, I really wasn't much of a coach at all. 'cause I wasn't providing the obvious answer. And even though I suspected I knew what wasn't quite, I feel like the kind of the area that wasn't quite working for her, I just knew that me saying, oh, it's this, oh, your hand's coming in, in the wrong place.

Or, I can't even remember what it was, or giving her a video and showing it. Actually, that would only take us so far. Back to what I was saying before, she had a feel in her own body and make it hers, a sense of what was right for her. And the way to do that I, I think, is, is first being very open, I don't know the answer is, well, I'm not, I'm not sure, but let's try various things out.

If you are up for this, why don't we try this? Said, why don't we try changing how your hands come in for all's sake? See, and the person in this particular case, off she goes, she'd swim



two lengths and then look up and say, how did that look to which again, not being a very helpful coach. I'm not telling you.

Tell me first, how did it feel? did you feel like you were getting more of a, a kind of a surge through the water or holding more, or, or you felt more relaxed or, I can't remember whatever it was. Tell me how it, how it felt.

Unfortunately, some, well most of this we can be ever so disconnected from our bodies.

the body is sort of, it's doing something over there and it needs another external person to come and say, no, don't do it that way. Do it this way. But the more I can help people to really connect with what's going on for them and feel it for themselves, then they'll, find, yeah, with some guidance. They'll find what's right for them. this might sound a bit smug, but I met this woman about six months later and she said, I, I got it. I, I finally got it. I thank you so much and I'm enjoying my swimming so much. it was a kind of realization that maybe it wasn't the right time and space for her then, but she had to find her own way and yeah.

[00:33:02] **Susan:** The enjoyment is everything. No, I suppose when we, like, why do we do anything if we, if we don't enjoy it, what's it giving us? And we'll become more and more disconnected from who we are if we're forcing ourselves through the motions.

[00:33:25] **Mike:** Yeah, it's hard to have people really give themselves a hard time in the very things that you would think we would only be doing 'cause we enjoy it. yeah.

[00:33:38] **Susan:** And that speaks to the knowing in action. I think that you write about Mike, that by feeling it. And it's somehow beyond words. So I think throughout the book. I mean, I, I, I, to me, it's, it's a rebellious book in a way there's, it, it's challenging conformity. And, I wouldn't say you're out there going, you, you know, you must not conform because that's a form of conformity, but there's an unconventional wisdom to, to your words.

Beauty and uncertainty are things you talk about a lot and I, I do think uncertainty is certainly brought in more to conversations now because that control that you talked about isn't there. So we have to have both sides. But beauty not so much. So where did this love of beauty come from?

[00:35:05] **Mike:** where does it come from?

I describe it as, as those moments where we're just captured by something in front of us or, or that we are feeling in ourselves. and there's a sense of, of connecting and also a sort of a wondering, wow, how could this thing in front of me or that I'm feeling, or this music I'm hearing, or, wow, where did that come from?



I suppose I haven't thought of it this way before, but I kind of think for me there's something really important about moments where I really feel alive as opposed to just kind of living. Openly share where that comes from. My, my, my wife, died coming up 20 years ago. And, yeah, all through her illness and then afterwards, there's a sense I have a, you have to keep living, you know, I, I children.

I didn't look after very well, but don't nonetheless have responsibility to have the job. And so you just keep going. You keep living. But there are moments, these magical moments where you can just feel so alive and with a beauty that's there. how lucky am I to be here doing whatever it is or to be seen this or to be with this person connecting in a beautiful way. yeah, I think that's, that's probably what's right at the very heart of it. and like I say in the book though, I don't open up all about all that stuff in the book, but I do say. Beauty is not something that's talked about on, on courses to be a coach. Oh, we are really missing something. I think it says something. Yeah. Something quite kind of wonder filled. You know what I mean? when you see someone surprising themselves with what they can do. You go home from having coached a session or from a conversation with someone and you're thinking, where did that come from? Why did I think of that idea in that moment? How amazing. it is very humbling. It's not like a, oh, aren't I great? Quite the opposite. yeah.

[00:37:56] **Susan:** And wonder filled. Is going to be my new word for wonderful. I think because the wonderful, it's interesting because that is a sense of fullness as well. Wonderful. But wonder filled gives it a sense of agency somehow that I can go out and fill myself with wonder. And one of my favorites words is, wow.

[00:38:26] **Mike:** Yeah, I might too actually. Yeah.

[00:38:30] **Susan:** And, and it's interesting because it's such a simple word, but I think it can conjure up so much. And if you're bringing wow into your day, then you're filling it with wonder.

So we didn't talk a whole lot about the sports. we've talked about sports, certainly Mike, but most people listening may not be. Athletes or sports coaches or whatever, that doesn't matter because people are people. And I think all of this helps us to understand ourselves, better. And high performance exists both in the coaching world and in the leadership world or working world, whatever world we look at,

[00:39:17] **Mike:** Hmm.

[00:39:18] **Susan:** but.

you mentioned calm and composed a few times, and I remember one of my first conversations with Allison Jones was in my book. I wanted to help people connect to that



feeling of being calm and composed without being horizontal because I think there's this sense that calm and composed means lying down.

[00:39:42] **Mike:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:39:43] **Susan:** for me, it's about a sense of spaciousness or expansiveness and looking at the world around us. Now, where else is this necessary outside of sports?

[00:40:02] **Mike:** Hmm.

[00:40:05] **Susan:** Last question, Mike.

[00:40:10] **Mike:** I, it's back to the presumptuous theme. I think I, yeah, I don't feel quite the place to, to kind of tell people in different areas of work or professional whatever. Oh, this is what you must do. I think, I think there's, there's like kind of core themes that I've found through the process of writing.

I've come to kind of try and understand better. one is about kindness, being kind to ourselves and kind to others. in the sense of compassion, I think just a readiness to try and understand where I am, why am I feeling this way and about the person in front of me. I think there's also something about openness, openness to the uncertainty.

Openness to admitting. I don't have all the answers. we're all trying to find our way here.

[00:41:17] **Susan:** Feel our way.

[00:41:18] **Mike:** Feel our way. Yeah. Yeah. and I think openness. It's the kind of bigger themes in a way to explore there, but. I, perhaps this is strain into other areas where I'm not qualified to talk, but you see so much of a kind of narrowing down of people's worlds, the kind of de and US mentality where actually the sense I get is it's like people are shrinking their world to a small and ever smaller enclave of people like us.

of people who know what's right. but my goodness, there's a richness out there. There's a whole, world we can discover by allowing ourselves, in part to have the courage to go with the uncertainty, but not knowing. And just find a way of being more open, sort of recognizing, I don't know what's going on for this person, or I don't know their background.

I don't know why they're doing whatever it is that they're doing. That might be really quite triggering for me. So I'll make the effort to find out, or, I'll recognize actually, it's not for me. I step back, but without closing down my world and shutting them off, putting them in a box. Hmm.



That was a bit abstract, wasn't it?

[00:42:51] **Susan:** No, not at all. Not at all. And I, I, I. I think what you say about the shrinking our world is, you know, COVID hasn't helped that. And, and also it's the assumptions that we carry about so many things. Dropping those leaves a space for wonder and awe and all, and all of these things to come through. And then we stop seeing us and them and we see. more of a, we are people. How do we go through the world together? So that's what I got from what you said. Not abstract at all. Quite beautiful.

So Mike. We're out of time and that actually flew. so if people would like to know more about you, read your book, connect with You, what's the best way of doing that, Mike?

[00:43:57] **Mike:** I, I'm really rubbish at social media,

[00:44:03] **Mike:** but probably the best place if you are into that stuff is LinkedIn. and I really like using that to make connections to people, not just. An extra thing to click on, but if it leads to conversations and,yeah, just finding out about the different worlds that people work in, that's super.

So I'm genuinely open to being approached maybe through LinkedIn or, I talk about the website. yeah, that's the door's open there. and I have a website which is called zigzag confidence.com, and then there's the book as well, you say, beyond Belief, the Art of Confidence Centered Coaching, and all good workshops and, and pretty much all the online platforms as well. Thanks to the, the publisher. Yeah.

[00:45:01] **Susan:** And it is one I highly recommend to anyone who's curious about furthering or deepening some of the things that we touched on today. Mike, thank you so much

[00:45:14] **Mike:** thank you.

[00:45:15] **Susan:** that conversation. I.

[00:45:19] **Mike:** it was very, it was great for me to, thanks so much.

