Gina:

Hi, Natalie and Max, thank you so much for being on the show today.

Natalie:

Hi, thank you so much for having us. And-

Max:

Great to be here.

Gina:

Yes. I'm so excited to chat with you. If you wouldn't mind, if we could just get started with some background information and just what inspired you to create Bala?

Max:

Yeah, absolutely. So, Natalie and I actually met at an ad agency in West Los Angeles called 72andSunny. So, we've each spent nearly 10 years in the advertising world, working through big ad campaigns for the likes of Google and Starbucks and these major brands that are household names. And we eventually grew tired of working on behalf of these major corporations and thought to create Bala while traveling through Southeast Asia. We took a little bit of time off, which was amazing, and went to a yoga class that was just far more meditative than we'd hoped. It was like a mental exercise, but not a physical one. And it was after that, that we started sketching out a new fashionable and more functional wrist and ankle weight, like those that existed in the '80s.

Gina:

That is so amazing. I think it's so interesting how yoga can inspire you to do different things. I feel it just really helps ideas and creativity start flowing. That's happened to me before, I went to a yoga retreat and I had all of these ideas at night and I just couldn't stop writing down ideas and thoughts and sketching things. So, I think it's really cool that that's how your business came to be. But I have your Instagram page up on my screen. I'll be sure to share it in the show notes, so everyone can check it out. But these are so beautiful, because when you think ankle and wrist weights, you automatically think about like the derpy fabric, Velcro situation, and these are so chic and so pretty. So, you have the idea for these weights. How did that go from concept to fruition?

What did that step look like?

Natalie:

So, I mean, honestly, it was ... Max had the idea in his head and he was trying to explain to me. I remember the moment and you he just drew it on a piece of paper. So, from then we didn't really know what was next, but we knew we could ask the right questions to get at what was next. So, we started asking around. Max's family happens to be in the toy industry. So, we asked some of his uncles for a manufacturer, so we could start prototyping. And we knew that prototyping would be first to getting product right. And then we just took small steps but in the right direction every single day, where we went prototyping. I mean, I think from first prototype to when we actually launched was probably like a year and a half. So we just like took the next step as often as we could, until we had a viable product to sell.

Gina:

That's incredible. And I feel like with things like that, it just falls into place once you're in it. You might not know what the next step is, but just researching and figuring it out as you go kind of thing. So I think that's so incredible. Do people just wear these around, do they just wear them or-

Max:

Yeah.

Gina:

"Hey, look at my cool bangle." Do they just wear them for life?

Max:

Totally. So, the idea started after a yoga class, so that was the initial point of entry, but you're absolutely right. People now use them for running, boxing, Pilates, but also just more casually, walking around the house and doing the dishes. And this core to the idea that fitness accessories don't need to necessarily look like fitness accessories to be effective. So, we love the fact that people are posting on social while eating chips and guac, they're also wearing their Bala bangles.

Natalie:

It's all about that style.

Gina:

Yes, that is amazing. Yeah, they're so pretty. Have you thought about expanding to other fitness tools? Because if you think about it, a lot of them could use a revamp after all this time.

Max:

Totally. That actually is where we're headed. We started obviously, with wrist and ankle weights, but then when we started looking around, we had realize that people aren't really making fashionable, thoughtfully designed fitness accessories. And what we've found is by applying design to these otherwise utilitarian products, people are almost more inspired to use them and work out. And it's inherently more fun. So yeah, we are in product development on a number of original, never before seen products, but then also taking the ones you're familiar with and making them a bit more fashionable.

Gina:

That is so exciting. If you can make a beautiful kettlebell, I'm in there. They're just so bulky. And I feel like, especially with the current situation, so many more people are obviously working out at home. And your fitness equipment, your little at-home gym, it can almost be an expansion of design in your house.

Natalie:

Yeah, no, that's like exactly what we're thinking. And then also, you mentioned kettlebells, that I had to jump in. We actually just launched something, so you probably haven't seen it yet, but it's the power ring and it's 10 pounds, and it's our take on ... it's like a kettlebell but basically, a totally different shape. But we already tested it with a few trainers and the movements that you can do, there's way more movements. The weight is evenly distributed versus bulky at the bottom.

So, it's kind of our take on the kettlebell. You should check it out.

Gina:

Oh, I love it. I just pulled it up on the website. Amazing. So, it's 10 pounds?

Natalie:

Yeah, 10 pounds each.

Gina:

I love it. And you could absolutely hold it like a dumbbell or a kettlebell.

Natalie:

Yeah, exactly. There's tons of movements you can do with it. So, we're really excited and that's one of our newer launches.

Gina:

Yes. And you have it in pink too, which is exciting.

Natalie:

We're always going to have things in pink.

Gina:

I love it. So, can you tell me about what it's like working with Mark Cuban and Maria Sharapova as your investors?

Max:

Yeah, totally. I mean, they have been awesome partners. We haven't been working with them long, but they've been well and truly engaged in the company. And I think because of what you'd mentioned in terms of folks trying to stay fit while staying home, it's just the right time for us to be focused on this space. And with a partner like Maria, that has such an incredible design sensibility herself, and with her running Sugarpova, she just has all sorts of helpful tips and tricks and strategies to make our business operations more sophisticated and smarter and more effective. So, it's just been a cool one, two punch between Mark and Maria, of having advisors that have been there and done that, at the absolute highest level, that makes sense of questions we have along the way.

Gina:

Yes, that is so great. And I think that it's so ... your branding and your aesthetic is so cohesive and so bright and modern. Do you have any tips for anyone that might be listening who is thinking about creating their own product or starting a brand? How do you get to that narrowed down cohesive level? Like any tips for that?

Natalie:

I think, definitely try to be clear in your vision. At the outset, we were always clear. Even though we were, at the very beginning, we had no idea what we were doing. We were very clear that we wanted our branding and everything about our brand, our fitness brand to embody something different and not just all the other fitness brands that are out there, but more with the fashion felt, like somebody might be wearing heels with Bala Bengals. So, we were very clear on this direction that we wanted to be ridiculous about it. Just way more fashion-y than it is like fitness and maybe sometimes, it doesn't make sense. Like the girl's maybe eating something while she's wearing Bala Bagels. It just doesn't really ... it's more like the anti-fitness. So, that was our clear direction in the beginning. So, I would say have a clear vision and that's the most important, and try to stick to that.

Max:

Yeah. I would also add, I have other friends that have started companies and taken different approaches to doing so, but one group in college, actually, I had some friends that started a Ski-film company. And their first films were just the absolute worst. And now their films are amazing. And it's just a real life proof point to it doesn't have to be incredible on day one. So long as, to Natalie's point, you're committed to the vision and you work through aligning the day-one realities to what it ultimately can be. So-

Natalie:

Yeah. Like don't be scared of being too perfect because I mean, our first stuff was pretty bad, but you just get better over time. So, not too precious about it.

Gina:

That's so smart. I think that done is better than perfect.

Natalie:

For sure.

Gina:

You can always tweak things later on, just do it.

Natalie:

You overthink and never launch, never act. So, it's been just not overthinking things has helped us a lot.

Gina:

And it seems like you have a really clear idea of who your ideal customer is too.

Max:

Yes and no. I mean, I think there is certainly the customer who's the ideal, like epitomizes what it is we stand for, but what's been really interesting, just as people are using them for different activities than we'd originally planned, the customer base is pretty wide as well. We have 20, 30 something fitness enthusiasts using them, but we also have older folks that are using them for their daily walk and things of that nature. So, it's funny. I think the brand is probably more focused than the product itself is. So, we have like the Bala loyalists that love the brand and the way we've pushed up against the traditional tropes of the fitness industry. But then the product itself is really functional and versatile and well-made, so it certainly has applications even if you're not necessarily wearing heels while wearing Bala.

Gina:

I mean, everyone does that, right?

Max:

Yeah.

Natalie:

Of course.

Max:

I know I do.

Gina:

Yeah, exactly. And it seems like you sell them at so many different retailers too. I could absolutely see someone walking through Urban Outfitters, who might not be a fitness enthusiast and seeing them and being like, "Oh, this is cool. This is different. I'm going to try these out." Whereas they wouldn't necessarily go to a fitness equipment website with the goal of getting ankle weights or risks weights.

Natalie:

By the way, that's, I would say for the most part, our customer. Somebody who just happens to be like, "Oh, I'm shopping on Goop or Free People for an outfit, but I see these cool weights, oh, I'll try it." That's how we started with that customer. Of course, now we just got into Dick's Sporting Goods. So, we're more in actually the fitness area, which of course makes sense for the product.

But I think initially, we definitely started with the customer who was just shopping around Goop or Free People.

Gina:

Yes. I get ... that would happen to me. I would be in there and be like, "Oh, these are cool. I'm going to try these." So, I would love to hear more about your personal fitness routines and nutrition.

Natalie:

So, I mean, I can let Max speak to his as well, but mine is, I do, do a lot of like random classes like Pilates or Barre classes, but my absolute favorite. And I think it's also because it just like eases my mind, is yoga. So, I always will. Yoga is my main practice. So, that's what I like to do the most. And I, of course, use the weights during them to make them more challenging. But I would say I also love some fun classes, like Isaac Boots or Amy Rosoff Davis classes, those can be really fun and challenging. So, low weight, low resistance classes, but make you stretch. Those are my favorite.

Max:

Yeah. I would say from my end, I've been rock climbing since I was 12 years old. And so, my fitness routine is really body weight based. So, like calisthenics, pushups, pull ups, that kind of thing. And so, it's funny, it's like the application of Bala there, is a small amount of weight actually makes a huge difference because it's not as if you're just trying to lift as much as you possibly can. You're actually trying to do less similar repetition as many times as you can, with smaller weights. And then I think it's probably fair to say, just given the state of the world, I've found that just doing it a little every day, like consistency has gone a long way in terms of our workout routines. And even from the comfort of your own home, you can do a lot and it can have a dramatic impact on your mental and physical health.

Gina:

Yes. I could not agree more. I feel like consistency is so much more valuable than intensity. I think if you're doing it on a consistent basis and not trying to kill yourself every single time, you're more likely to sustain it for the long haul.

Max:

Totally.

Gina:

Yeah. But it's interesting what those one to two pound weights, they look so tiny, but once you put them on and you're using them for a while, it'll burn pretty quickly. And a reason a lot of people see plateaus in their routine is because they're just doing the same thing. They're imposing the same demands on their body. So what an easy way, just to add a little bit of extra resistance without it being too much.

Natalie:

Yeah. We totally believe in the light resistance. I personally don't even really wear the two pound, I believe in like one pound all the way. Of course, I do love the 10 pound kettlebell for different workouts too, like smaller workouts. But like if you're adding into your lifestyle, I would always recommend like lower weight.

Gina:

I've done some studies too to show that like low weight, high repetition exercise can be just as valuable as the super heavy weight, lower rep type of exercise. So, I think if it feels better on your body, you can absolutely do that instead and still get really good strength and lean muscle gains from that.

Max:

Yeah, totally. That's actually one of the things that made us feel really good about the product at the outset, was just the fact that adding weight to your workout is the oldest fitness technology that exists. It's like we've taken it for granted, but weight makes you work out harder, higher caloric burn. And so, we just feel good that we're not selling a product that's not actually effective when added to an already exhausting workout, you're definitely going to feel the effects and see results.

Gina:

Absolutely. And it's so good for bone density too. And you mentioned the elderly people who love these weights, I feel sometimes it can be intimidating for a senior to start a weight training program. So, this is such a nice, easy way for them to add some extra resistance and just help keep that lean muscle and protect their bones too.

Max:

Totally.

Gina:

So, what about nutrition? Do you guys have any favorite healthy meals that you loved? Are you vegans, anything like that?

Natalie:

I'm vegetarian and I strongly believe in a no meat diet, but I mean, Max eats meat. So, it's not like it really matters. I think it's to each your own. Mine's more for animal reasons, but I would say moderation is the most important. Because we try to eat healthy all the time, but it's like we, of course, have pizza and pasta and like let yourselves cheat, because it's just horrible when you're restricting all the time. And it's never going to work out. You're going to end up overindulging another time. So, I really strongly believe in like treating yourself and moderation, but just striving to be the best you can in terms of your ideal healthy diet.

Max:

Yeah. There's also ... I read once that it's some absurdly high statistics, in the high 90 percentile of those folks that lose any significant amount of weight, tend to actually gain it back. And so, I think to your earlier point about consistency, it's like you got to make sustainable decisions both as it relates to your fitness regime and your nutrition. And so, the idea that you'd cut out carbs entirely indefinitely, is one that I think is easier said than done or easier done in short periods of time. But then what happens when you finally start ordering pizza again. It's a slippery slope.

Gina:

Yes. I totally agree. And I feel by doing that, it makes those things that you're depriving yourself of, so much more desirable. If you tell yourself you can't have a brownie, you can't have a brownie. And then all of a sudden it's like you're eating a pan of brownies because you're like, "I told myself I couldn't have a brownie for so long." It's just not a way to live your life. If you want a brownie, eat a brownie, you want a pizza? Eat the pizza and enjoy it, and just move on. And I think that there's absolutely place for all foods in our diet, but just choosing the ones that you know make you feel good, and sometimes that's because they're nutrient dense and sometimes that's because they just make your soul happy.

Max:

Totally, totally. No, the psychology behind it is really interesting. And I feel sometimes we're not taking that step back to recognize the adverse effects of that mental game you play with yourself by not allowing yourself to eat a certain food at a certain time.

Gina:

Yes, 100%. So are there any personal development or business books or online resources that you guys love and that you would recommend?

Max:

I absolutely love Shark Tank.

Gina:

Yes. Were you on Shark Tank or no?

Max:

Yeah. So, we were. We were on Shark Tank this past season, season 11.

Gina:

Oh my gosh. That is so amazing.

Max:

[crosstalk 00:19:10]. Yeah, but I mean, we were massive fans of the show. I had seen every episode long before we even had a business to try to pursue on the show. So, it was an immensely surreal experience to be pitching to the Sharks, in a room full of strangers, and ultimately having made a deal

Gina:

That is so incredible. I can't wait to watch the episodes. So, are there any other resources you guys-

Natalie:

Actually, I love How I Built This. So, NPR's How I Built This. When we were first in New York and launched Bala but were still working advertising jobs, and it was just challenging, it really helped me to be listening to a How I Built This every single morning on my way to the subway because it was just, I heard other people's startup founder stories and it was always, of course, challenging and there was a grind story because no brand doesn't have a grind story. And so, I find that really inspiring, and some of the specific topics were relatable for me. And I learned a lot throughout that.

Gina:

That's a great tip. I forgotten about that podcast and I used to listen to it all the time. It's a really good one.

Natalie:

Yeah.

Max:

I would also say that Shoe Dog is pretty incredible. That Phil Knight, Nike founding story. And for us, there's just been some convenient commonalities as it relates to the struggles with inventory, for example, that are just interesting to see, the biggest shoe brand in the world struggled with the very same things.

Gina:

Oh, okay. That's very interesting. Yes, how does that work for inventory? Where are you guys based out of? Where do you source the products? I have no clue how any of this works.

Max:

Yeah, totally. No, it goes back to the point of taking just ... as long as you keep taking steps forward, you're doing the right thing. By no means were we product development experts or manufacturing experts, but we ultimately, figured that out. So, outside looking in, it is this very mystical thing. But once you establish a few connections, you start to clarify things a bit. So, we are currently making the product in China. Though, we do have a clothing line that we make locally, here in Los Angeles. And basically, you do the best you can with projections on the product you sell, relative to the timelines associated with producing it. And we're in a growth phase. And so, it's been challenging because every time we think we're going to need a certain amount, actually we're going to need considerably more than that.

But there's a learning curve to understanding how much you're going to need of something, the same way if you were going to the grocery store to shop for yourself, and then you had relatives thing with you, you'd need to buy quite a bit more. Maybe that's a terrible analogy, but it's the first one that came to my head.

Gina:

No, I know what you mean, yeah.

Max:

Yeah. So, you figure it out and develop a bit of a pattern, but it's the backbone of the business is, to be able to have product on hand to sell.

Gina:

Okay. That's so interesting. And you sell out frequently too, correct?

Max:

Totally.

Natalie:

It's been it's like Max says, we think, "Oh, we'll make so many bangles." And then we think it's plenty. And then the demand just keeps increasing. And it's obviously the perfect storm of being on Shark Tank and then everyone working out from home, so building Gyms from home. So, it's been something for sure, that has surprised us each time we launched a product. But we are working on ... we've already ramped up production to be able to be in stock more. It's something we've absolutely been working on, and overbuying and all of that stuff.

Gina:

Yes. That's incredible. And gosh, what a great industry to be in right now with everyone working out at home.

Max:

Totally. No, we're excited to be able to contribute to people's mental and physical health while staying at home. And so, it's just a cool ... sure, it's nice to have the demand and to be selling product, but I think more importantly, it's the value that we're bringing to customers' lives is what we're more interested in and developing products or improving on products that haven't seen improvement in decades. It's just a very inspiring space to be able to be in.

Gina:

Yes, totally. Well, it makes such a huge, positive impact on mental wellbeing, like you mentioned before. I know for myself, I've worked out more consistently over the past few months than I ever have, just because it's keeping me sane right now. And I know so many people that feel the same way.

Max:

Totally. No, I'm the same way as well. Like it's been breakthrough, at least as it relates to consistency to just ... you kind of schedule it and there's very little else that can get in the way of that schedule these days, in terms of working out.

Gina:

Yes. 100%. So, the title of the podcast is Healthy in Real Life. And I always ask guests this question, but I would love to hear something that you do in your own routine, that helps you to create a sustainable, healthy lifestyle for yourself.

Natalie:

I think creating a healthy, sustainable lifestyle, I think, honestly, I already said this a little bit, but it's moderation. So, it's, if I can't get to a yoga class during the week, not really stressing myself out about it and just saying, "Okay, next week I'll make it to some classes." Or if I'm just eating horribly all week, it's not getting stressed out about that. And then just saying there's always room to improve next week. So, honestly I think moderation and then just always like educating myself on what truly is healthy and trying new things, trying new work outs, seeing what really sticks. And going online and finding good, healthy recipes that are actually tasty so that I can eat a chickpea pasta, and it's actually delicious, and it feels like a cheat when really, it's good for you. So, I staying in the know on healthy recipes as well.

Gina:

Absolutely.

Max:

Yeah. I would say for my end, I think the healthiest thing that I do has very little, at least directly, to do with exercise or diet. I think it's actually the time I take off to do something artistic and creative, which just takes you to a totally different zone. Being able to turn off a little bit, for half an hour, an hour each day. I recently bought a Potter's wheel, a ceramic wheel. And so, I like to [crosstalk 00:26:25].

Gina:

Wow.

Max:

How to do pottery and it's just the least expected, but most fulfilling thing that I'm doing on a regular basis.

Gina:

Yes. I love that. I think it's so important to find time to cultivate your hobbies and things that don't relate to your job. It's nice to have that escape and time to do something that's just for you too.

Max:

Totally. And it's funny because with exercise, it can sometimes feel like a responsibility, an obligation, and admittedly, it's one that you've demanded of yourself, but it's nice to have those things that you don't have to do, but just enjoy doing because you enjoy doing them and it's that simple.

Gina:

Yes. I cannot agree more. So, where can everyone find you online?

Natalie:

So, right now you can find us ... honestly, the quickest way to get us would be ShopBala.com. We have several items in stock and if we don't have the one or the two pound weight and stock, usually they're available for pre-order, that ships in about, I think in this case, a month. But it would be the quickest way because we are also at several other stores, like Carbon38, Bandier, Goop, Free People. But again, they've already done a lot of pre-orders as well. So, I think most of their stock would be sold, but you can find us at any of those places, and ShopBala.com.

Gina:

Perfect so, I'll include links to those in the show notes so you guys can check them out. They're so beautiful. I'm so excited to see your new product lines too. It's going to be amazing.

Natalie:

Thank you, yay.

Gina:

Yes, thanks so much for being on the show today. It was great chatting with you.

Natalie:

Thank you so much for having us.

Max:

Thanks.