



SoundBites Podcast Transcript

Episode: William Sawalich: Race Car Driver and Hearing Protection Advocate

Dave Fabry:

Hi, I am Dave Fabry, host of "Starkey SoundBites" and we're really pleased to have with us today William Sawalich who is no stranger to the hearing aid industry.

William Sawalich:

Yes.

Dave Fabry:

And you've been around this industry for, I think I've known you since you were two years old. I remember when I first joined Starkey, you were running around at the classes, even helped me close a couple classes or two. And for as long as I've known you, you've been interested in hearing, drumming, and speed.

William Sawalich:

Yeah.

Dave Fabry:

And so, William, thank you for joining us. We're on location here on the Starkey world headquarters and we're gonna have the opportunity to to see you race this weekend. And you've had this meteoric rise in terms of your performance on the ARCA circuit. So, William, welcome to "Starkey SoundBites".

William Sawalich:

Thank you, I appreciate it. And I've been around hearing for all my life now and I enjoy being in that environment and I've been around a lot of loud things in my life and I'm just always protecting my hearing. That's been the most important thing to me while I've been around those loud things.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, I remember when you were quite young, you picked up the drums, a drummer like me, but much better I say. And you know I remember seeing you perform live with some of your band mates and even at that point you were thinking about hearing protection. This will air in October which is Protect Your Hearing Month. And you know, what was it? Was it just because your parents and your family, your grandparents, everyone is so steeped in this industry that you were always focused on, even though you like and have noisy hobbies, protecting your hearing. What was the catalyst for that?



William Sawalich:

Yeah, I don't know. It's kinda weird that we are in the hearing aid business and trying to protect our hearing and I love loud activities so I kinda thought that was funny all the time, but I don't really know what attracted me towards that. I mean, obviously, just always protect your hearing and I mean, I don't know, it's just kinda natural for me to be around a lot of environments.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, and I think what's so impressive is you're 16 now. You just barely have your driver's license and you've already won several races racing against people twice your age at least.

William Sawalich:

Yeah.

Dave Fabry:

And sometimes though, when you're a role model for kids your age wearing hearing protection might not be perceived as cool. I remember when I was your age, I didn't even think about audiology or hearing protection at that point, and I thought it was cool to play on the crash cymbals until my ears rang and now, they won't stop ringing. But-

William Sawalich:

Yeah.

Dave Fabry:

How did you handle it if some of your friends you know, when you were playing drums would say, "Why are you bothering to wear hearing protection?" You tend to think of yourself as bulletproof. Did you ever encounter that where they said, "Why are you bothering to wear hearing protection?"

William Sawalich:

Yeah, no, my friends never really thought of the repercussions of like later in life when you have been around the loud sounds. And obviously, I've been taught to think about that. And something I've been around, and I mean, ever since I was little, I got the custom shooters plugs just for any loud activity I was around, and they were the best for me. I could really do everything I could do normally without the loud sounds and just damaging my hearing.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, and now you're in a whole different echelon where you're racing a car, speeding around the track. Did they evaluate when you took your driver's test to see if you could do right turns or are you really only good at left turns?



William Sawalich:

They did evaluate that, and I did fail my driver's test twice.

Dave Fabry:

It was on the right turn exercise?

William Sawalich:

Well, I didn't look around enough, which I'm used to.

Dave Fabry:

You're used to being out front.

William Sawalich:

Yeah.

Dave Fabry:

So why do you need to look around-

William Sawalich:

I don't need to worry about that. No, I mean, I can prove I'm a good race car driver.

Dave Fabry:

Yes, you can.

William Sawalich:

Even though I failed my driver's test twice, but I got it on the third try and it was a perfect score.

Dave Fabry:

Excellent, I have no doubt. I know you're a perfect student. So, you know, I am old enough to remember, you know you were initially, when you entered racing, you were known as the Raging Rooster. Talk a little bit about the backstory on that. Now you're William Sawalich but you still, I like the homage that the rooster still factors into some of the signage and things. What's the origin of the Raging Rooster?

William Sawalich:

Yeah, so I raised chickens when I was about four and I raised them till they were six. I mean, a couple of them died off but I mean that's gonna happen. And I always had an interest in birds and love for them. And when I started racing in Quarter Midgets, we kinda thought I needed a nickname like every other



NASCAR driver. And we just found the Raging Rooster 'cause we thought it was somewhat mean while also keeping the bird and rooster personality in me.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, again, you know, I've always been such a fan and watching you grow up from that tender age. I was gonna be a veterinarian growing up, and I know you have this deep love of animals, drums and then cars. So, let's talk a little bit about your entry. You started running Legends, is that one of the classes? Or what are the classes that you started in?

William Sawalich:

Yep, so I started running Quarter Midgets at Little Elko, which is right across the street where I'm gonna be racing this weekend. And I started doing that for four years just to get my bearings and have a little bit of fun. And then I moved up to Legend Cars which was on the bigger track across the street from the Little Elko Speedway. And then I started going nationally with that, starting to take it more serious and learn some more things. And then I moved up to Late Models which are full body stock cars and a lot bigger and just a different environment. And now I'm here in the ARCA Series and about to race at my home track this weekend.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, and you also race, you're doing some limited racing with trucks too, right?

William Sawalich:

Yep, with the Tricon Garage and that's pretty cool to be with all the NASCAR guys and you know, I watched them growing up and it's really cool to be there right now.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, and you've been very competitive with some pretty famous racers and had the opportunity to have received informal mentoring from some pretty famous racers too.

William Sawalich:

Yeah, absolutely. It's really humbling to be able to have that opportunity and experience from those guys who have maybe 20 years of experience. And I'm not even alive for 20 years, so it's pretty crazy to be able to do that.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, now you're with Joe Gibbs Racing and Toyota Racing Division and one of the things I think that many people don't think about is yes, the noise exposure is obvious that these cars are racing around the track at 7,500 RPM. Inside the cockpit and on the track, you're exposed to a lot of noise, what do you do about that now?



William Sawalich:

So, I have racing receivers so they're just silicone plugs that go into my ear and I can talk to my crew. I have a button on my steering wheel, that's all I got, and I can talk to them and tell 'em what the car's doing, and my spotter can also talk to me and tell me what's going on around me with other cars. But when I'm out front, he doesn't have to talk to me much. But it is still loud in there but in a race car you still have to hear the tune, you have to tune into the motor and kinda hear when you have to shift, especially on road courses. But now we have digital dashes, so it's a little bit easier to do that and makes it easier to now dampen the sound more.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, so one of those challenges like you said is you gotta be in tune to the engine, you gotta be in tune to your team and you're using a plugin module with a passive attenuation and that provides you with enough comfort to be able to still communicate through that plugin array but still be in tune to the car sounds that are so essential to making sure that everything is staying in good working order.

William Sawalich:

Yeah, it's like a happy medium. I mean, people don't really notice how much your ears matter in a race car. Listening to the motor, listening to your crew and all that has to be really crisp and just for your brain to really pick apart the pieces of it is really important because you're going at 150 miles an hour and you gotta figure stuff out really fast.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, your reaction time is essential. And I think the drumming probably helps you with timing and processing. They know that drummers have very good temporal processing and that ability to use that temporal processing in combination with the reaction time, something you don't wanna lose. With hearing loss, you'd lose some of that ability.

William Sawalich:

Yeah, absolutely. And like in a race car you have to have a good rhythm and keep consistent lap times and that's something I learned from drumming is doing the same thing over and over and over and just getting repetitiveness is really important.

Dave Fabry:

Are you still drumming these days? Do you find any time for that or not really?

William Sawalich:

I'm a little too busy to do that but whenever I see it in the corner, I go around and just hit some cymbals.



Dave Fabry:

Yeah, you've already had some tremendous success. We had the opportunity to watch you, not face to face but watch you on the screen in Phoenix. And like you said, your early experience in these ARCA Series is you've often been out front leading for the whole race.

William Sawalich:

Yeah.

Dave Fabry:

But then sort of the school of hard knocks thinking about the fact that you're 16 years old racing with people much older than you, learn a little bit about when you're out in front, you're controlling the tempo of the race but then if they go under a caution flag, everyone resets.

William Sawalich:

Yeah.

Dave Fabry:

And that's part of the dynamic of racing that keeps it so interesting as a spectator sport. You were out in the race, we watched you when you were racing in Phoenix, you had a huge lead and they went under caution, everything went ahead. You led most of that race, you came back from a spin out, got all the way back up to the front and it was the last kinda the runoff, I guess-

William Sawalich:

Yeah.

Dave Fabry:

Where you got bumped.

William Sawalich:

Yep.

Dave Fabry:

And the interesting thing is then recently you ran in Berlin where it was the opposite where you were coming from behind and you took over someone who had led most of the race.

William Sawalich:

Right, yeah, you kinda gotta learn to do both. I mean, it's really important to know how to lead a race and it's really important to know how to be behind people in a race and set your own pace and try not



to burn your tires off 'cause in the last 20 laps, that's really important to have a lot of grip and to be able to catch them. At the end of Berlin, I was two and a half tenths better than the leader. I know it doesn't sound like much but that's a lot.

Dave Fabry:

It's a lot in that time.

William Sawalich:

When the competition's so close, it's really important to be the best you can by the end of the race.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, that's awesome. And so, you've already won a couple races and what people may not know with the ARCA Series is that's only two levels right below NASCAR. And so, you have an age limit that prevents you from running in the next level until you're 18. So, you're gonna be running and racing at this series, you're gonna have plenty of opportunity to learn over the next couple years and win I think a lot more.

William Sawalich:

Yeah, so we'll be doing the same thing next year, just learning. And then my third year with Joe Gibbs Racing, I'll be full-time in the NASCAR Xfinity Series.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, and Xfinity is just one level below full-blown NASCAR.

William Sawalich:

Yes, so that's pretty exciting.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, I can't tell you how proud I am. I can say I knew him when he was the Raging Rooster and now, he's you know, you're winning, you've got a huge following in sports and certainly Starkey is privileged and pleased to be a sponsor. It's such an interesting synergy in terms of, you know people think a hearing aid company sponsoring race cars but it's really this prevention that is consistent with the theme of this month's protect your hearing. And then I think you are being such a strong role model to say, "I need to protect my hearing for later, "not only for what I'm doing now." So that you can be in tune to the car and tune to everything around you but for 20, 30, 40 years down the road, you wanna have preserved your hearing as much as possible for your career and to the sounds that connect you to life.



William Sawalich:

Yeah, absolutely. When we got into the sport, I don't think we realized how much hearing prevention was needed in the sport. Obviously, the drivers are the main subject to the loud sounds but also the crew guys, you know they work around the running motor and pretty much everybody that is involved in the sport, even the spectators just need to protect their hearing.

Dave Fabry:

Really raising awareness for the important of protecting hearing while still enjoying music or the sport and all of the different sounds that you might encounter. And I think you're just wise beyond your years that you've been concerned with protecting your hearing from when you were this tall and really being born into this but also now being a representative for kids your age, I think is so empowering, particularly during Protect Your Hearing Month.

William Sawalich:

Absolutely.

Dave Fabry:

So, William, one of the things I remember was Starkey holds an expo where we bring in a lot of customers, we're going to Vegas and a couple years back you had the opportunity to talk about Livio at the time, which number one, I think it was impressive that you were with normal hearing, wearing the devices and being connected to your smartphone. But you shared a story at the expo a little bit about a creative way that you were using Livio AI devices at the time for a competitive educational advantage.

William Sawalich:

Absolutely, I mean, at that time when I was little, I was really involved with technology, and I thought it was awesome. And when Starkey came out with the Livios, they had so much technology; you know tracking your steps, your brain activity, the fall detection, I thought that was the coolest part because usually what you see is hearing aids in older people and sometimes, they have trouble falling. And that's kind of a cool safety feature. And yeah, so I wore 'em in school and I told everybody about the really cool features which one of 'em would be language translation. And they're like, "Hey why don't you use that language translation?" So, I did and ended up working and it was pretty cool.

Dave Fabry:

Yeah, I think you got a good grade for that class too.

William Sawalich:

Yeah and no one was the wiser, so.



Dave Fabry:

Exactly, and so I think using technology, I mean, back in the day when I was in school, they didn't even allow us to use calculators in class. Now I think it's really technology can leverage the human advantage. And so, I think it was a very creative application, it was funny. And most importantly, I think you're again, setting the example in the same way that you have with wearing hearing protection. You were up there saying hearing aids are cool. And so many people worry about the stigma associated with hearing loss and the use of hearing aids that does exist. But you're up there saying, I'm using it to my advantage so that I can do better in this class and in life in addition to being connected to the people around me.

William Sawalich:

Right, and I think that's the coolest thing that Starkey is doing is making hearing aids cool.

Dave Fabry:

Thank you very much for being on this special edition of "SoundBites" and we wish you the greatest success this weekend and in the future as you continue your meteoric rise on the racing circuit.

William Sawalich:

Thank you, I appreciate it.

Dave Fabry:

Thanks for being here. And for our "SoundBites" listeners, we hope you enjoyed this special episode. If you're listening to this instead of viewing it, I would encourage you on this one, to go to the YouTube channel 'cause we're gonna take a tour of the car. We've got the hauler in the background here. William is out here in 90-degree heat wearing his suit. That's gonna be nothing like what you're gonna have this weekend with the heat. But I'd encourage you to go to the YouTube channel and watch this special issue.

We're also interested in your ideas for future topics. This one, during October, prevent hearing loss is important. But if you have other ideas for topics or to bring in other experts on topics like William as a role model for preventing hearing loss, send us an email to soundbites@starkey.com and we'll bring in other people and cover the topics. We look forward to covering those in future episodes. If you liked this episode, please like it, subscribe, share it with your friends, your network, your colleagues, and really help raise awareness for why it's so important. And even though it seems counterintuitive that a hearing aid company is interested in preventing hearing loss, it's so essential because hearing is so precious and vital to the human condition. Thanks for joining us, we hope to see you and hear you again soon.