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Eva Redefines What It Means To Play Survivor

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Eva Erickson and Jeff Probst. Photo: Robert Voets/CBS.

By John Powell – GlobalTV.com



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Survivor fans saw her at her highs and her lows and Eva Erickson wouldn't have it any other way. She was diagnosed with autism at an early age and doctors didn't believe she would ever live independently. Eva proudly proved them wrong time and time again not only with all of her achievements but in connecting with so many she calls friends and family.

John Powell: Eva, it's wonderful to be talking to you today. How are you?

Eva Erickson: I'm great. I'm ready to rip, as always!

John Powell: I want to congratulate you not only on making the finale of Survivor but also for your willingness to put yourself out there and really share everything for the world to see. Not just nationally, but globally Survivor has a massive audience. What did it mean for you to do that and did you have any trepidation about going on Survivor and letting people see the real you?

Eva Erickson: I knew going into the game that my autism would probably come up. It's something that deeply impacts me in my everyday life – it's part of who I am. And Survivor is this amazing game that reflects real life and society. So I knew this was going to be a big deal.

My parents were a little worried. My mom especially – they've seen me go through episodes my whole life. They asked, "How are you going to feel when this is seen by the world?" But I told them, I've never let my autism stop me from doing anything I wanted to do and I wasn't going to start now.



Eva Erickson. Photo: CBS.

If people saw me at my lowest point I knew I'd rise from it. I was ready for people to see that because I think it's important for others to understand what someone like me goes through. I didn't grow up with anyone in media who represented autism the way I experience it. Being able to show that perspective especially in a time when there's so much misinformation lets me tell my story. Hopefully, it gives others someone to root for and look up to. I'm very proud of that.

John Powell: What are some of the challenges when it comes to autism and support in America?

Eva Erickson: There's been a long-standing stigma around the label of autism. A lot of parents – and even individuals diagnosed – see it as something negative. But the label is actually empowering. It gives you insight into how to help your child, how to support yourself and how to access resources.

When my parents found out I had autism they didn't deny it or push it away. They embraced it and asked, "How can we support her?" Because of that, I received so much help, so many therapies and tools that helped me learn how to regulate and succeed in life.

I'm a big success story when it comes to early intervention and therapy. And while autism varies from person to person I truly believe that anyone on the spectrum can live a full, happy life if they're supported and encouraged to believe in themselves.

Autism doesn't mean something's wrong with you. It's part of who you are. It comes with challenges, yes, but also with unique strengths.

John Powell: Speaking of support, we saw Joe out there take you under his wing, almost like an adopted daughter. You leaned on him a lot. Tell us what that relationship meant to you especially in such a cutthroat game.



Joe Hunter and Eva Erickson. Photo: Robert Voets/CBS.

Eva Erickson: The beautiful thing about Joe is that he didn't just say, "I'm going to be your person." I came to him and he accepted me with open arms. He saw me, understood me, and was willing to be there for me. Every day, I'm grateful for him and what we built.

He's an amazing man. I'm so glad the world gets to see not just how emotionally open he is, but how that is strength. He's the picture of masculinity—not because he hides his emotions, but because he embraces them. That's powerful.

John Powell: At Tribal Council, you got more votes than Joe. Did you ever think that was going to happen?

Eva Erickson: Absolutely! I believed in myself. Joe and I played the game as a duo and I intentionally created this dynamic where it looked like he was the leader. I wanted people to believe he was calling the shots so they wouldn't come for me but we were collaborators. I had my own strategic game, my own story.

I believed I could win over him but I also knew we weren't going to tear each other down. People wanted a showdown but we weren't giving them that. We respected each other enough to say, "Here's why I should win," not "Here's why they should lose." That's what made it so different and so powerful.

John Powell: During the final Tribal Council, Kyle dropped his bombshell about the What was your reaction?

Eva Erickson: Yeah, that was wild especially because it happened while I was still speaking! Kamilla cut me off and shifted the conversation so I didn't get to finish explaining my move with Shauhin.

It wasn't that I orchestrated a whole play around him having an idol. Kamilla told me he had one. I didn't believe her. She wasn't my ally. Kyle told me the truth that Shauhin had a plan to target me and Joe. So, I pivoted. I didn't want to sit next to Shauhin in the end; he's a great debater and schemer. I wanted to sit next to Joe and Kyle.



Kyle Fraser, Eva Erickson and Joe Hunter. Photo: CBS.

My move wasn't the plan itself. It was convincing Joe that his closest ally was turning on him. That was the strategic swing I made but I didn't get to articulate it fully.

As for Kyle and Kamilla? I had no idea how close they were. None of us did. They fooled everyone. I spent every day with Kyle, we were so close. The fact that he pulled this off? Hats off to them. Incredible acting.

John Powell: One of your superpowers this season was how you kept your alliance together. What was it like balancing all those different personalities?

Eva Erickson: You're probably referring to that split between Mary and David versus Kyle and Shauhin. That was a really tough moment.

David started treating some of my friends, like Kyle and Kamilla, poorly. He wasn't respecting them. Even though I loved David as a person, I had to make a moral decision. Maybe it was bad gameplay to cut someone so loyal but I needed to protect the people who were being disrespected.

And I had other paths forward. I had built strong relationships. I picked my core four and even though I had to cut Mary and David I brought the rest closer together. I even showed them my Safety Without Power advantage to prove my commitment.

I might not have won Survivor but my team did. I said early on that I wanted to sit next to Kyle and Joe in the end and I did.

John Powell: We only get to see part of your Survivor journey. Is there anything that happened on the island that you wish had made the cut?

Eva Erickson: Absolutely! I was frustrated that my strategic side wasn't shown. You never saw the strategic conversations I had with Joe, Kyle, Shauhin or all of us together. We were constantly discussing strategy.

After watching the finale I understood why. The edit allowed the audience to experience the Final Tribal like the jury did, realizing in that moment how complex I really was.

What I am sad about is that they didn't show my relationships beyond Joe. I had deep bonds with so many people. Kyle is like family. I went to his wedding after we got back and I cried at it! Kamilla and I bonded over food. Mary and I were close too even though they only showed our break-up. My social game was my biggest weapon and they didn't really show that.

John Powell: What we didn't know while watching was Kyle's ethical debate about whether to take your place in the fire-making challenge. If he had told you he wanted to do that, how would you have responded?

Eva Erickson: He did! He came to me and said, "Eva, I'll do it for you." I was sitting with Joe, having an episode. I felt like a failure, not because I couldn't build a fire, but because of the pressure in my own mind.

Kyle brought me a little snail to cheer me up and said, "I'll take Kamilla out." But I said, "No. I'm not letting you take this from me." Joe offered too and I turned him down as well. Once my mind is set, I don't budge.

John Powell: You went through a lot out there. Survivor has its ups and downs. Would you do it again?

Eva Erickson: Absolutely! I lost and I'm competitive! I want to win! I got to the end with my team and they won but I want another shot. I'd go back in a heartbeat.

John Powell: Usually in the new era of Survivor, athletes and physical threats get targeted quickly. But this time, your group flipped the script and took control. What did that mean to you?

Eva Erickson: It was amazing! As an athlete I'm a team-oriented person. We protected each other. We weren't just one challenge threat. We were a team of them. So many players want to drag a "goat" to the end, but I wanted to go with strong people. And we did that. Competing against and alongside like-minded, strong players was incredibly fulfilling.

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