

Racing without *Fear*

University of Guelph sprinter and two-time Paralympian
Leah Robinson sets sights on Rio Summer Games





“In a stadium with 80,000 people, I swear I heard my dad at the start line. I could hear him yelling, ‘Go Leah!’”

LEAH ROBINSON

BY DAWN MATHESON

PHOTOGRAPHY • NICK IWANYSHYN

There are a few things Leah Robinson would like to clear up right away.

First, the “para” in Paralympics means these games run parallel to the Olympics. Para does not stand for paralyzed or paraplegic. Not anymore, at least. The Games were originally conceived in 1952 for athletic participation of British Second World War veterans who had spinal injuries. Nor are the Paralympics the same as the Special Olympics.

The Paralympics are about elite performance sport where athletes go through a stringent qualification process to compete at the Games, just like their counterpart, the Olympics, only more impressive since these athletes have an additional challenge at play: varying physical impairments.

Right on the webpage for the Paralympic Games, which begin Sept. 7, about two weeks after the Olympics, it lets you in on why you need to follow these events:

Nowhere else is the skill, strength, speed, endurance and courage of Paralympic athletes — and the human capacity for overcoming challenges — more in evidence than in this athletics arena.



Leah Robinson has little sensation in the right side of her body so she relies on her coach, Jason Kerr, to watch for signs that she is struggling.

Another thing Robinson would like you to know is that the Paralympics are about ability, not disability. She is a runner first, a 400-metre sprinter who also has right-sided hemiplegic cerebral palsy from an injury at birth, when the umbilical cord was wrapped around her head. Because of this, her right leg is shorter than her left. This body difference just happens to be something in the cards for Robinson but doesn't define her.

There is an emerging public perception around disabilities as simply a different way of being among many ways of being

human — a way that society needs to not only accommodate but welcome and embrace.

The way Robinson looks at disability is much like how Nike shoe designer Tobie Hatfield described it when he created a laceless shoe for a young basketball player with cerebral palsy. The boy had written a letter to Nike saying he couldn't tie his shoes. Neither could Nike's employee No. 1, Jeff Johnson, after he had a stroke at age 62. “Some people become less-abled sooner than others,” Hatfield has said.

“I just got there faster,” says Robinson.

Given the wide variety of abilities, para-athletes are placed in categories for competition based on their impairments, called sport classes. The allowable disabilities are broken down into 10 eligible impairment types. Robinson competes as a T37. T is for track; 3 for cerebral palsy; 7 indicates the severity of the impairment with the highest number being the least severe. The highest classification is 8.

“I actually don't notice it myself, until I see myself walking past a glass building and say, ‘Hey, I'm walking like a horse,’ or until someone says, ‘Hey, did you hurt your leg?’” which can happen from three to five



Leah Robinson's parents are a great source of support for her. She credits her dad, a lifelong runner, with inspiring her to start running.

PHOTOGRAPHY • COURTESY OF THE ROBINSONS

times a day. Robinson lives with no pain; she takes no medication. She is perfectly comfortable with her body but certainly has challenges.

"I get the most attention at night in the bar scene. Like when I wear high heels. People think I'm drunk because of my gait, and I don't drink — never during training season." The sprinter is frequently carded or questioned by bouncers or police officers. "Until they talk to me and see I'm stone-cold sober. And I'm the DD (designated driver)."

There will be about 1,100 athletes showcasing their abilities this summer at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games — more than ever before. At the first official Paralympic Games in Rome in 1960, there were 25 athletics events. In Rio, there will be 177. This means the standards for competition have risen significantly. This July, when Robinson competes in the Canadian championships and Rio Selection Trials in Edmonton, she hopes she makes the cut. At 22, this would be her third Paralympics.

Leah was the youngest athlete on the world stage when she competed in Beijing at 14 years old.

"Initially, when we got the news that she might be going to Beijing, my wife and I kind of scratched our heads. She is only 14," says Robinson's dad, Chris, himself a lifelong runner. "And is she really that good?"

Chris says Athletics Canada wanted to see if his daughter could hold up under pressure, running with that kind of extreme competition and with that size of audience.

Leah credits her dad as the inspiration behind her running. "I used to run behind him on his jogs, trying to perfectly copy his gait ever since I noticed mine was different," says Robinson, recalling her childhood growing up in Mannheim, just outside of Kitchener. At eight years old, the father-daughter team ran Leah's first five-kilometre race together. "She eventually surpassed me in running," says Chris. "Distance runners have slow-twitch muscle

fibres, like me. It became pretty evident that she has the fast-twitch kind."

It was also Dad who was the great motivator behind her performance in Beijing. "In a stadium with 80,000 people," says Robinson, as tears welled up, "I swear I heard my dad at the start line. I could hear him yelling, 'Go Leah!'" Robinson's run was stellar. At such a young age, she finished 10th in the 200 metres and 11th in the 100 metres. Robinson went on to become the Canadian record holder in the 100 metres, 400 metres, 800 metres and 1,500 metres. In 2012, Robinson broke her own Canadian record (1:10:75) for the 400 metres in a qualifying run for the Paralympic team for the 2012 London Games. The 400 metres would become her run.

"I can say that my wife and I learned pretty quickly; she *was* that good," says a proud father.

The success at Beijing and subsequent races set the bar high for London, a race with more in her division than she has ever faced. This time, the whole Robinson family would come to cheer her on at the finish line, not just her dad. "It ended up being the worst race of my career," says Robinson. "I internalized the pressure. I was in Lane 8 — you are running blind. I blazed the 300 then crashed and burned my last 100."

Robinson quotes a common saying among runners: "No one chooses the 400; the 400 chooses you." It's not for the faint of heart. Running at such a velocity for a prolonged period causes a significant amount of pain and requires great mental stamina. "It tests your guts," says Robinson. "With 120 metres to go, you know you are going to really suffer. This is where you need a strong mind; you have to get your mind past it."

Up until London, Robinson hadn't really experienced any bumps in the road in her track career. Having one occur on the world stage dealt her a real blow. "You devote four years of your life to mere seconds. I really felt I fell from grace." Robinson had what she calls a good, solid three-day pity party,

one that turned into a break from track in 2013. Robinson needed to reassess. Did she still love to run? "I needed to be able to wake up every morning and look in the mirror and know I still wanted it."

Enter the Speed River Track and Field Club and the University of Guelph track and field varsity team. Robinson had been running with Trinity Western University Track Club in Langley, B.C., where she was studying toward a bachelor's degree, up until 2013. With such little sponsorship for athletes, particularly for para-athletes, it was just too expensive to live out West, train and pay for school. She also needed the support of her parents and brother, Liam, 19. "My parents and I are very close. They support me in everything — my daily needs (my mom is my manager and secretary) and my emotional health."

Robinson was hooked up with a young coach, relatively new to the Guelph team, 30-year-old Jason Kerr. "That's when things

really began to turn around," says Robinson.

"Leah was on a downward slope when she showed up," says Kerr. "It was new for me — to take an athlete who had lost her way, then slowly chip away, emotionally and physically, and bring her back to peak performance level."

Kerr's first priority in coaching is to create a supportive and inspirational environment. "Between 4:30 and 6 p.m., (training) needs to be the highlight of the runner's day. If you aren't having fun, you won't perform." This is what is unique about Guelph track — the team makes the individual. "I hate the idea that track is an individual sport. We need to remove that tag from what we do. When one competes, we all compete."

Robinson's training partner, Heather Rayner, paces all her workouts. Like Robinson's first running mate, her father, Rayner runs without impairment and Robinson makes every effort to duplicate Rayner's gait in order to optimize speed and efficiency.

"We are quite a duo, on and off the track."

In fact, Robinson says she could name her whole wedding party from her teammates. Nicknamed "Mother Hen" on the team, Robinson says she is definitely a spitting image of her own mother, Laura, when it comes to looking after other people. "I will always pick people up from the bar, open up my home if they need a place to stay. ... I've been so taken care of by my team, I'm just paying it forward."

The team approach worked. Robinson developed a new-found passion for running. "I realized very quickly I wasn't done. It was normal to have these failures. I can bounce back." Within a year, she broke her own Canadian record at the Pan Am Games. Robinson's mantra became "Trust the Process" and her signature characteristic resilience. "My body knows how to run fast." That year, Robinson tattooed Psalm 56:11 just below her sports bra: "In God I trust. I will not be afraid," reflecting

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her personal spiritual convictions and those of her family.

“Leah is a unique challenge for me,” Kerr says. “Yes, she is the first para-athlete I’ve coached, but working with her is so much more than that.” Kerr is quick to state there is little difference in how he coaches an able-bodied athlete. The Guelph track team shoots for full integration. “Everyone’s body is unique. My job is to watch for clues and that is how I plan the workouts. I’m a body language reader really, and that is the book I need to read so I can help write the next chapter.”

“Jason picks up on every single sign and symptom that I’ve ever had ... and we’ve only worked together two years,” says Robinson. “He can even tell when my body is struggling just by looking at my face!”

Robinson has little sensation in the right side of her body so Kerr’s observations are vital in order to prevent injury. Kerr watches for any significant difference in the gait between her two sides. Robinson’s right heel never touches the ground when she runs and sometimes the cerebral cortex just doesn’t fire at all. “Some days, he just has to shut the workout right down.” And when he does, her teammates are right there to support her. “There isn’t a male runner on our team who hasn’t carried me up and down the stairs after a tough workout,” Robinson says laughing.

Kerr says Robinson’s comfort and playfulness with her body has allowed him the freedom to address all challenges openly. “Her difference is not a taboo subject,” says Kerr. “Even more, she wears it like a badge of honour.” Kerr says she makes no excuses. “Here’s a woman who had the odds stacked against her and she doesn’t whine or complain. She performs at the absolute highest level possible.”

It’s this attitude of resilience and determination that has put Robinson into the role of captain for the varsity sprint team. “This really is a very unique situation,” says Kerr. “We have a para-athlete — and there aren’t many in Canadian Intercollegiate

Sports — who is the *only* member of an all-able-bodied track team *and* she is also the captain.”

Kerr says Robinson sets a precedent for the team. The culture of the group has changed and the runners are faster because of her. “Truth be told,” Kerr continues, “she has changed the way that I look at training and sport.” Kerr says you could not find a better mentor for the future generation, making her a natural in her current role travelling with the Right To Play speaker series. “A big part of my presentation is about the importance of being resilient — specifically in elite sport,” says Robinson.

Next year, after she graduates from University of Guelph with her sociology degree, she wants to pursue nursing and help deliver babies. “My injury happened at birth, so my starting point was obviously different than other babies. I am so thankful for the nurses and doctors that got me out alive in the delivery room. I want to be a part of that and give back.”

Robinson has also made the tough decision to retire from track in 2017, at the young age of 24. “I need to be aware of my body. I can feel it deteriorating. I can’t push it at such a high level for too long.”

She, along with approximately 35 teammates and coaches, will give their all at the trials in Edmonton to get a shot at the Rio Games. The qualification limit for Robinson’s event is set at a time she has yet to beat. “We need to train to go to a place we’ve never gone to before,” says Kerr.

“It will be a very sentimental time — my last Olympic trial and my toughest competition yet,” says Robinson. “I’ll give it my all. I’ve got nothing to lose.”

World Championships 2017 will be Robinson’s swansong. “Believe it or not, they are held in London. I want to end back there, where I almost ended my career the first time.” Robinson thinks she can do it so long as her teammates are at her side, so long as she puts in the work, “trusts the process” and can hear her dad yell “Go Leah!” at the starting block, even if it’s just in her head. 🗣️

style panel



What could be done to draw more attention to the Paralympics?

SUZANNE: One thought would be to integrate at least some of the Paralympics with the Olympics. Perhaps we watch basketball, then wheelchair basketball.

INDU: The Paralympics could draw more attention with a greater social media presence, more corporate sponsorships and larger media coverage. All of these would bring more publicity and fanfare to the Paralympics and I believe more enthusiasm and interest. Also, schools often tie in school projects and learning activities based on the Olympics and they have times where the students are watching the Olympic events, so it would be great if schools were able to do the same for the Paralympics.

DAVID: Obviously one of the easiest ways to “spread the word” these days is through grassroots social media. Wouldn’t it be great if all of our readers took just a few minutes to share interesting stats on their Facebook, Twitter feeds, etc.? As an example, did you know the 2016 Paralympics have 23 sports, with 528 actual events being held in 21 venues and 176 countries participating? For more information, just Google 2016 Paralympics.

EMMA: I would love to hear more stories about our Canadian Paralympians in the media. I’m sure this would help spread awareness and bring attention to the Games as well the athletes. The more we hear about the incredible athletes the more we are able to support our Paralympians.





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