Racing without Fear

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

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.

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.

“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
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 showing their abilities this summer at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games — more than ever before. At the first official Paralympic Games in Rome in 1990, there were three track 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. 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 Robinson chose not to compete in. “I internalized the pressure. I was in Lane 8 — you are running blind. I blazed the 300 then crashed and burned my last 100,” says Robinson.

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 began to turn around,” says Robinson. “I was on a downward slope when she showed up,” says Kerr. “It was new for me to be running with that kind of audience. I really 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 Triumphant Western University’s 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, Lian, 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 +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.

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“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 doing it. 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 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.
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it at such a high level for too long."
Kerr says Robinson's comfort and playful-
ness 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 deter-
mination 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 before," says Kerr:
"It will be a very sentimental time — my
last Olympic trial and my toughest com-
petition 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. "It takes
the process" and can hear her dad yell "Go
Leah!" at the starting block, even if it’s just
in her head.

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 lead to more 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? For 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 as the athletes. The more we hear about the incredible athletes the more we are able to support our Paralympians.