

Breaking Barriers: A History of US Women in the Paralympics

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Introduction

Women have played an integral role in the success of the US Paralympic team, from the moment they first took part in Tokyo in 1964 up to and especially in the present day. Indeed, the success of American women athletes in the Paralympics has been a key component to the overall American dominance at the Paralympic Games over the past half century. However, the important role women have played in the Paralympic Games is often overlooked, due in large part to the paucity of both media coverage and scholarship on this topic. By calling attention to this unfortunate deficiency, this paper aims to help to begin leveling out the sharp discrepancies in scholarship between the Olympics and the Paralympics, as well as between male and female Paralympians. It will conclude with a consideration of possible methods to help achieve greater equality not only in female representation on Team USA, but also in the involvement of women with impairments in sports more broadly.

Entry of US Women into the Paralympic Games

Although 45 women took part in the first official Paralympic Games in Rome in 1960, none of them were from the United States.¹ The underlying reasons for this are not entirely clear. The all-male delegation of 24 American athletes earned 25 medals, placing them fifth overall in the medal ranking. The United States is one of only five nations to have competed at every Summer and Winter Paralympic Games, though only male athletes competed prior to 1964. US women have taken part in every event since the Tokyo 1964 Paralympics. At those Games, 21 American women participated,

helping the United States bring home 123 medals and earn a first-place finish in the medal rankings.²

Rosalie Hixson, a 19-year-old track and field and swimming athlete, garnered eight medals at the 1964 Paralympics, six of them gold.³ This made her one of the top-performing athletes of the entire event, male or female. She won first place in the javelin, discus, club throw, shot put, and freestyle and backstroke swimming events. She took silver medals in breaststroke and precision javelin events.⁴ Ms. Hixson had a long career, winning gold medals at the 1968 and 1972 Paralympic Games as well. While there is little literature available on Ms. Hixson, a few newspaper articles mention her accomplishments (including some obituaries upon her death in 2006). She worked as a secretary in Pennsylvania, and had been a strong athlete (a jumper) on her high school track and field team before she contracted polio in 1959. In 1967 Rosalie Hixson told the *New York Times*, "Sports was my life before I got polio. Now it's my life given back to me."⁵

Ms. Hixson's story illuminates several important trends in the history of Paralympic sports for women in the United States. Firstly, the entry of women into the Paralympic sporting arena began differently than it did for men. Adaptive sports in the United States developed markedly in the 1960s, spurred by the need to help rehabilitate large numbers of American veterans from WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. But women in the US military were not eligible to serve in combat positions until very recently. Over 90% of women deployed in the Vietnam War served as nurses, and women were not admitted to the major service academies (West Point and the US Naval, Coast Guard, and Air Force Academies) until 1976.⁶ Therefore, early female Paralympic athletes were, like Ms. Hixson, individuals whose impairments resulted from disease, injury, or who were born with congenital conditions such as blindness or missing limbs.

Secondly, Rosalie Hixson shows the relative strength of American sportswomen in the Paralympics as compared to their counterparts from other countries. While of course not all of the 21 American women who took part in the 1964 Paralympic Games were as successful as Ms. Hixson, American women medaled in almost every event (the only event in 1964 in which American women did not medal was table tennis. They medaled in archery, darts, swimming, and wheelchair fencing - women did not compete in snooker, wheelchair basketball, or weightlifting in 1964).⁷

Moreover, whereas the United States had taken fifth place in the 1960 Paralympic Games in Rome, with only male athletes competing, they took first place in 1964 with the help of the strong female contingent. The American women continued to help buoy the US team to be among the top five in the medal rankings in every subsequent Paralympic Games, indeed winning more medals than the American men on several occasions in spite of never comprising more than half of the team. In the overall gold medal tally for American Paralympians, the two winningest athletes are women – the athlete with the most gold medals in the Summer Games is swimmer Trischa Zorn (32 gold medals) and for the Winter Games the American with the most gold medals is skier Sarah Will (12 gold medals).

Under-recognized Superstars

Trischa Zorn is the most successful Paralympic *or* Olympic athlete, male or female from any country. Ms. Zorn, who was born blind, took part in the Paralympics from 1980 until 2004, and won a remarkable 32 gold, nine silver, and five bronze medals (for a total of 46 medals, more than twice that of any other US Paralympic athlete). By means of comparison, the winningest male Paralympian from the US is wheelchair racer Bart Dodson, who earned a total of 20 Paralympic medals during his long career (1980-2000), 13 of them gold.⁸ By any measure, Ms. Zorn is an outstanding athlete, and yet information about her 24-year Paralympic career is surprisingly scant. A search of the *New York Times* archives uncovered only three articles in which Ms. Zorn is mentioned. Trying to find information about her career online, one finds conflicting and incomplete information (the official IPC database was used for this paper, though this database is also incomplete at times).⁹ One of the only sources for detailed information about female Paralympians is the Team USA website, which is operated by the US Committee and contains data on past, present, and future Olympians and Paralympians from the United States. The site discusses the life story of Ms. Zorn, who in addition to her athletic career has also served on the US Olympic Committee's Athletes' Advisory Council, and has advocated for US military veterans to get involved in Paralympic sports and other activities.¹⁰ Ms. Zorn ended her Paralympic career at the age of 40, when she won a bronze medal and served as the US flag bearer in the Closing Ceremony of the Athens 2004 Paralympic Games.

The general scarcity of information, records, and scholarship on American women in the Paralympics makes crafting a coherent history of their participation a daunting task. Rosalie Hixson's experience also exemplifies the woeful lack of recognition that Paralympic sportswomen have received in the United States, despite their conspicuously successful and pioneering achievements. Dr. Ian Brittain, author of the definitive book on the Paralympics (*The Paralympic Games Explained*, New York: Routledge, 2010), confirmed that no authoritative history of US women's involvement in the Paralympics has yet been compiled. Dr. Brittain himself has been working on a complete American Paralympic history (focusing on both men and women), and observed that compiling accurate information invariably presents major challenges. Dr. Brittain maintains one of the largest historical collections in the world pertaining to the early Paralympic and Stoke Mandeville Games as a result of extensive travel and interviews during his postdoctoral research, and much of his research is based on this personal archive.¹¹

Positive Change

Despite the scarcity of reliable documentation and materials, it is clear that the number of American women taking part in the Paralympics has steadily grown over the past half century. The number of events open to women has continued to grow as well. The IPC and the US Paralympic Committee have made efforts to increase opportunities for women to take part at all levels. For example, in line with similar efforts made by the IOC, the IPC adopted policies in 2003 which established the goal of having 30% of their decision-making bodies be comprised of women by 2009. According to a 2013 research report by the University of Michigan's SHARP Center for Women and Girls, the IPC had mixed results in meeting this quota. While over half of the management/director-level positions were indeed filled by women, the CEO and COO were male in 2013 (and still are five years later), as are the president and vice-president of the IPC. Women comprised about 85% of non-management staff, meaning women in the IPC are over-represented in lower-level staff positions, and under-represented at the highest levels of management and governance.¹²

While the vast majority of National Paralympic Committees (NPCs) are led by men (89% according to the 2013 SHARP Center study),¹³ the United States appears

to be among the few nations with significant female representation in leadership positions. The United States does not have a sports ministry, so the US Olympic and Paralympic Committees serve as the governing bodies and the fundraisers to support elite sport in the US. The USOC is a federally-chartered nonprofit corporation that oversees all Olympic and Paralympic sport in the US, and is responsible for generating its own resources (it receives no money from the government aside from some funds for Paralympic military veteran programs).¹⁴ The current CEO of the US Olympic Committee is a woman (Sarah Hirshland), as is the Chief Financial Officer (Morane Kerek).¹⁵ The US Paralympic Advisory Committee, which was created to advise and enhance Paralympic programming and resources, is currently chaired by a man but 40% of its active members are women.¹⁶ In spite of the progress made in these management structures within the USOC and USPC, many structural obstacles remain for both female athletes and impaired athletes (and especially for female athletes with impairments). Two of the largest ongoing structural barriers to participation are the lack of options and the lack of visibility for impaired sportswomen in the United States. While these barriers have been persistent and are tied up in larger societal issues, by examining them we can begin to see new roads forward towards greater inclusion and acceptance of these athletes.

Ongoing Structural Barriers

Lack of programs, coaches, and role models

One of the key challenges for women taking part in adaptive sports in the US is that they have very few options in terms of programs and coaches, and have historically had few role models to look up to. All too often, young women are still not encouraged to play sports to the same extent that their male peers are, and this discrepancy especially affects young women with impairments. Scholars have identified several critical issues faced by young women attempting to get involved in sports, such as the lack of information and awareness of any existing programs. Given the geographic expansiveness of the United States, it is often unfeasible for young women, even those who show great athletic promise, to travel regularly to a facility or a team that caters to those with impairments. Relatedly, few coaches are sufficiently qualified to coach impaired athletes in general, and those who are qualified

often devote most of their time and effort to training male athletes. A lack of role models who can offer young impaired women accurate and realistic information on what is attainable is a problem compounded by the overall lack of media coverage of the Paralympics and other adaptive sports.¹⁷ Few athletes have managed to negotiate all these barriers to entry, yet one athlete has shown that with the right support, resources, resolve, and talent, tremendous success is possible.

Tatyana McFadden is one of the best-known Paralympians in the US today, as well as one of the most decorated with 17 Paralympic medals. Ms. McFadden is also the winner of 22 major marathons, which typically receive more media coverage than the Paralympics – as such, she has gained broader name recognition. She recently won the prestigious 2018 Boston Marathon, the third consecutive year she has done so, and is a five-time winner of the New York City Marathon. Ms. McFadden was born in Russia with a hole in her spine due to spina bifida, resulting in paralysis from the waist down. She was adopted at age six by Deborah McFadden, who was then Commissioner of Disabilities for the US Department of Health and Human Services. In order to try to boost Tatyana's frail strength, Deborah McFadden enrolled her daughter in whatever sports programs were available: wheelchair basketball, swimming, and sled hockey.¹⁸

Tatyana excelled at track and field events. However, in high school she was told that she could not race against able-bodied athletes on the track, because her wheelchair created a safety hazard and gave her an unfair advantage. She was permitted to compete in separate wheelchair events, but that usually meant circling around an empty track by herself, which she found both embarrassing and not competitive. In 2005, Tatyana and Deborah McFadden sued their local public-school system, and won the right to race on the track against able-bodied athletes. This lawsuit laid the groundwork for the eventual passage of the Maryland Fitness and Athletics Equity for Students with Disabilities Act, which requires schools to give students with impairments a fair and equitable opportunity to compete in interscholastic sports. Tatyana continued to fight for equal access for impaired athletes, and in 2013 federal (i. e., nation-wide) legislation was passed to enable students throughout the United States to have the opportunity to become involved in school sports.¹⁹ As impressive as her Paralympic and marathon records are, the passage of this far-reaching legislation may prove to be Tatyana McFadden's most meaningful victory.

Lack of media coverage of the Paralympic Games

In February 2018, the two most-watched events on American network television were the Super Bowl (in early February), and the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics (in late February). While millions of Americans watch the Super Bowl for the love of football and their hometown team, many others watch it with a focus on the breaks in-between the football action. Super Bowl commercial spots are highly coveted, very expensive, and watched by millions of viewers. In 2018, several media outlets ranked the number one Super Bowl commercial as an inspirational Toyota ad that focused entirely on one female Paralympian, Lauren Woolstencroft.²⁰ In the ad, titled “Good Odds,” viewers see a newborn baby with missing limbs being lifted out of a hospital bed, and a caption that reads, “Odds of winning a gold medal?” followed by “1 in 977,500,000.” This huge number then progressively decreases, as the baby becomes a toddler walking on her knees, a frustrated child trying to ski and walk, and then an increasingly confident young woman taking part in ever-more difficult athletic endeavors. Backed by an evocative song with the lyrics, “if you knock me down, I’ll get up again,” we see the young woman struggling through wipeouts and difficult physical conditioning, and eventually speeding down an alpine skiing course. An announcer says, “Up next, Lauren Woolstencroft,” and she zips down a course lined by signs that read, “Paralympic Winter Games,” while the rapidly decreasing odds finally stop at “1 in 1.” She triumphantly finishes the course, and her name and accolades appear beneath her proud smile, “Lauren Woolstencroft: 8x Paralympic Gold Medalist.”²¹ Toyota, a major Olympic and Paralympic partner, tells viewers to “Start your impossible,” and “When we’re free to move, anything is possible.”

As this memorable and widely-viewed commercial debuted during the first commercial break of the Super Bowl, just a few weeks before the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and Paralympics, it evoked a particular sense of inspiration, pride, and interest in this athlete and the struggles she has faced. However, Ms. Woolstencroft’s nationality is never made apparent in the commercial, so many American viewers would assume that she is an American. And since the Paralympic Games are not broadcast on any major television networks, American viewers would not have had the chance to see Lauren Woolstencroft in competition during the Games. If they had seen her, they would have known that she is in fact a Canadian Paralympic athlete.

This commercial, while an inspiring and effective marketing tool, highlights one of the major structural barriers to the participation of American women in the Paralympic Games – a lack of media coverage to the point where most Americans would be unable to name even a single Paralympic athlete if asked. In the Toyota commercial, the outstanding Canadian skier is presented as a “universal” impaired individual. No major television network in the United States offers live coverage of the Paralympic Games, while the Olympic Games receive extensive coverage on NBC, a major broadcast network. The IPC website, ParalympicSport.tv, receives its highest number of viewers from the United States, since there is no other outlet through which Americans can follow the action of the event.²² The lack of media coverage of adaptive sports in the United States plays a major role in keeping the number of female Paralympians low.

Overcoming Structural Barriers

As the examples above show, there remain many structural barriers to the participation of women with impairments in sport at all levels, even in the wealthiest country in the world. Beyond a lack of programs and role models, there is very limited visibility due to the lack of media coverage of the Paralympics. These structural barriers have the potential to create a discouraging cycle of non-participation, as athletes with impairments often have to go to great lengths to participate (and must have the resources to do so), but often receive little recognition when they are successful. However, in recent years we have seen the opposite trend occur. While still participating in numbers that are less than their male counterparts, female Paralympians have taken part in the Paralympic Games in greater and greater numbers with every subsequent event, with tremendous success in events at both the Summer and Winter Games. Through utilizing new online platforms, many Paralympic athletes have built their own brands and careers, bringing greater visibility to their sports and to the options available for athletes with impairments in the process.

Female Paralympians in the US have circumvented the long-standing lack of visibility through an effective use of social media. While major television networks such as NBC and ESPN have consistently declined to cover the Paralympic Games,

there are now many alternate ways to see and learn about Paralympic athletes. Initially, many female Paralympians created blogs as their media outlets, but in recent years there has been a trend towards other more interactive social media platforms. Athletes such as Tatyana McFadden and Paralympic skier/cyclist/rower Oksana Masters have thousands of followers on Twitter and Instagram. These athletes are able to regularly update their followers on their athletic endeavors, and can also do so through public speaking and other community engagements. It allows them to cultivate their own image, and to convey the message that their lives are full, exciting, and productive. For example, rather than commercial sponsors who may wish to focus on their missing limbs, visual impairment, or otherwise “different” bodies, the athletes can crop their own images to show themselves in a more ordinary light, such as partying with friends, enjoying a good meal, taking selfies with celebrities, or relaxing at the beach. These platforms also offer the athletes opportunities to directly engage with fans through live chats. While empirical studies measuring the impact of social media on participation numbers in adaptive sports have yet to be carried out, those Paralympians utilizing these new platforms have undoubtedly helped raise awareness about the opportunities available for young women who are living with impairments.

Through both social media platforms and traditional media and advertising, some Paralympic athletes have had successful careers as public speakers and as spokeswomen for products and services. For example, Sarah Reinersten, an amputee runner who competed in the 1992 Paralympics in Barcelona, has had a subsequent long career in track events, marathon, and triathlon. Still competing in 2018, Reinersten now also works as spokesperson for Össur, a manufacturer of prosthetic equipment, and as a motivational speaker. She offers presentations to large corporate groups about setting goals, facing fears, and overcoming setbacks.²³ Reinersten has also published a motivational memoir titled *In a Single Bound: Losing My Leg, Finding Myself, and Training for Life* (New York: Lyons Press, 2010). Two-time Paralympic medalist, snowboarder and double-amputee Amy Purdy also works as a motivational speaker and has authored a bestselling memoir, *On My Own Two Feet: From Losing my Legs to Learning the Dance of Life* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2015).

Another athlete who has taken her career into her own hands is wheelchair

basketball player, kayaker, and alpine skier Alana Jane Nichols, the first American woman to win gold medals in both Summer and Winter Games. She is active on social media, is a spokesperson for various organizations promoting adaptive sports and sporting opportunities for girls and women, and works as a motivational speaker. In her recorded TED talk, "Becoming the CEO of Yourself."²⁴ Nichols recalls that when she broke her back and became paralyzed at age 17 from a snowboarding accident, she had no idea that she could still be an athlete, and there were no role models she could look up to. She acknowledges her responsibility to show young women and girls that they can achieve success no matter what obstacles they may face in life. This powerful message resonates well beyond the community of young women with impairments, but is of particular importance to them given the historic lack of role models for them in the United States.

Looking Forward: US Paralympians in 2020

At the Rio de Janeiro Summer Paralympics in 2016, female Paralympians from the United States swept the podium three times, in two different sports. The track and field trio of Tatyana McFadden, Chelsea McClammer and Amanda McGrory claimed the top three spots in the T54 1,500 and 5,000-meter finals. In the debut of paratriathlon, Allysa Seely, Hailey Danisewicz and Melissa Stockwell swept the medals in the women's PT2 classification. The most decorated US athletes (male or female) were Tatyana McFadden in track and field, and Jessica Long in swimming, who won six medals each. American women comprised about 45 percent of the US Paralympic Team in the 2016 Rio Games, the largest percentage to date. Although they comprised less than half the team, they won more than half of the United States' medals, including 24 gold, 24 silver and 21 bronze.

Women had fewer medal opportunities since there remain more events for men than women at the Paralympics. Yet the trend is heading in the direction of more equity across genders.²⁵ According to event organizers, the 2020 Paralympic Games will have 1,756 slots for female athletes, which will be the most female participation ever.²⁶ Women will compete in two new Paralympic sports, badminton and taekwondo, though it remains to be seen if American women will qualify for either sport. If past performance is any indication, American women are expected to have a

very strong showing at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, particularly in wheelchair basketball, cycling, athletics, and swimming events.

Conclusion and Future Research

The IOC and the IPC have long histories of proactively influencing increased participation in sports by marginalized groups, and nowhere has this been more apparent than in their role promoting elite, competitive sports for people with impairments. The number of women participating in the Paralympics has continued to climb with every subsequent Games, and forthcoming changes to the events open to women are expected to bring even greater parity between male and female participants. Women have also started to play an increasingly large role in positions of management and governance, with the United States well exceeding the 30% goal laid out by the IPC. However, while the numbers are heading in the right direction, there are still major discrepancies between the visibility of Paralympic athletes and that of their Olympic counterparts, despite the highly successful performances of many Paralympians. The media coverage is one factor responsible for this imbalance, as television networks do not cover the Paralympics, nor do major news outlets regularly run stories about athletes with impairments. Some resourceful Paralympians have taken media coverage into their own hands by managing popular social media platforms and promoting themselves on their own terms. The long-term impacts of these new forms of promotion and information-spreading have yet to be studied but hold promise for bringing greater visibility.

In-depth studies on the Paralympic Games, on Paralympians, and on adaptive sports remain extremely limited. Scholarship on women's sports is also still an emerging area of study, making research on women in the Paralympics a daunting task for an Olympic historian accustomed to finding robust and accurate archives and other documentation that can be used in research. There are many directions that future research could take, which could in turn help strengthen adaptive sports for women in a more global context.

While the earliest women athletes entered adaptive sports exclusively through congenital conditions, injuries, or illnesses, American women who have served in the armed forces are now increasingly entering the adaptive sports arena as well. As the

US remains militarily engaged abroad, there is still a strong link between the forerunner of the Paralympics (the Stoke Mandeville Games) and the future of the US Paralympic team, in that it is still used to restore a sense of purpose to injured war veterans. The Paralympic Military Program began in 2004, and actively promotes Paralympic sporting opportunities to injured American military service members and veterans. The program runs camps and clinics across the United States, which introduce Paralympic sports and local resources to military members. The USOC has partnered with the US Department of Defense and the US Department of Veteran Affairs (both federal government bureaus) to receive funding to help connect wounded service members with Paralympic sport. The program serves over 2000 athletes annually.²⁷

In Pyeongchang, the American roster was comprised of 24.3 percent veterans, whereas in 2012 the team was 22.5 percent veterans, and in 2010 only 10 percent were military veterans.²⁸ According to Rusty Schieber, the coach of the US wheelchair curling team, the increasing proportion of veterans on the Paralympic team is attributable in part to the fact that injured veterans are eligible to receive various types of special financial support. As adaptive sports can be extremely expensive, many potential Paralympians simply do not have the necessary financial resources to participate in them. Coach Schieber notes that from the earliest stages of involvement, veterans are eligible to receive subsidies from the US government that offset the substantial costs of equipment, training, and travel that all competitive athletes face. With an increasing portion of the US Paralympic team comprised of these subsidized veterans, and with an increasing proportion of veterans being women, a closer examination of American female veterans in the Paralympics should be conducted. Anecdotally we hear stories about adaptive sports helping to restore purpose to veterans' lives, but empirical studies that look specifically at women have not yet been carried out.

More research should also be done on the social impacts of using female Paralympic athletes in advertising campaigns. Do these campaigns reach beyond their intended goals of selling products? Do they raise awareness about adaptive sports and positively affect the number of young women participating? Do they foster social acceptance of individuals with differences, or do such advertising campaigns set an impossible standard for those individuals? One study, "Docile Bodies, Supercrrips, and

the Plays of Prosthetics,” supports the latter view, taking an approach that appears mainly theoretical.²⁹ An empirical study on this topic would be of particular importance in the United States, where the Paralympics are not broadcast on network television – advertising campaigns may be the only point of reference for many when it comes to Paralympic women.

While much work remains to be done to raise awareness about past and present issues affecting American women in the Paralympics, I hope that this paper will be one of many building blocks towards a more robust literature on this subject.

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障壁を超えて：パラリンピックにおける アメリカ人女性の歴史

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女性パラリンピアンが増加し、女性がコーチ、その他の指導的立場に就く機会拡大のために、過去数十年間で、いくつかの注目すべき取り組みが行われてきた。しかしながら、パラリンピックにおける全体的な変化の速度は、依然として非常に緩慢であり、オリンピックよりも遅い。

オリンピック競技における女性アスリートの包摂の歴史に関する研究を基に、この論文では、米国人女性パラリンピアンが直面した大きな課題に加えて、彼女たちが過去半世紀以上に亘りもたらした多大なる功績、パラリンピックにおける完全な平等の担保を妨げる多くの構造的な問題について論じる。例えば、女性アスリートは様々なレベル（アマチュアからプロに至るまで）での参加の機会や、コーチや尊敬できるロールモデルの数も少ない。また成長過程においても、男性と同じようなスポーツ参加は奨励されていないことが多い。それに加え、意義深い職業を見つける際にも、男性障がい者以上に苦勞することが多い。ゆえに、彼女たちは、エリートアスリートとして、自身を支えるに必要な物質的資源も持っていないと言えるだろう。

米国においては、パラリンピック大会報道がメインストリーム化されるにあたって未解決の課題が横たわっており、それは、米国人女性パラリンピアンが次世代の障がい者アスリートに与える全般的な影響を弱めている。国際パラリンピック委員会（IPC）とアメリカパラリンピック委員会は、女性パラリンピアンに対して平等とインクルージョンを約束してきたが、この約束が現在も守られていないことは、米国人女性の参加者数によって示されている。米国のパラリンピック選手団において女性アスリートの割合が50%以上になったことがないにも拘わらず、直前の夏季および冬季パラリンピック大会において、メダル獲得という視点から最も大きな成功を収めたのは女性だった。本論文では、こうした矛盾について検証し、平等を妨げる構造的障がいを今後克服していく方法について考察する。