

Alana Nichols Achieved Her Impossible. Now She's Helping Others Do the Same.

September 19, 2019



Paralympian and Team Toyota athlete, Alana Nichols, was just 17 when she knew it was time to start her impossible. Despite a snowboarding accident that left her paralyzed from the waist down, Nichols still loved athletics and used sports as a way to adapt to her new world.

“After my injury, getting back into sports really got me back into life,” Nichols says. “I just had to figure out how to adapt. I got into a basketball chair and suddenly, I felt athletic again.”

A competitive high school athlete, Nichols took to wheelchair basketball naturally. But with her self-described need for speed, basketball didn't give her the adrenaline rush she had grown accustomed to. So, she returned to the slopes—this time as an alpine skier.

Competing as a dual-sport Paralympian, Nichols was not only the highest medaling athlete at the 2010 Games, but also the first U.S. female Paralympian to win gold medals at a Summer and Winter Paralympic Games. Now, Nichols is pivoting away from her own Paralympic accomplishments to help others pursue their dreams by pushing for the inclusion of adaptive surfing as a Paralympic sport.

“I was given this opportunity to reach an impossible goal,” Nichols says. “Now I’m ready to give back, to help pave the way and create opportunities for other adaptive athletes.”



Nichols is working closely with the International Surf Association and USA Surfing to further the development of adaptive surfing. Able-bodied surfing is making its Olympic debut in the 2020 Games in Tokyo. If Nichols has anything to do with it, adaptive surfing will not be far behind.

Nichols has always been drawn to sports like snowboarding and surfing because they offer her a kind of creativity that she couldn't find in other sports. That creativity, and the creativity of her fellow athletes, is what's pushing the sport forward.

“It takes a lot of resilient people that have the same dream coming together to make it happen,” Nichols says. “We’re still developing the categorizations, the boards themselves. Classification is essentially leveling the playing field for categories of disabilities.”

Adaptive surfing is especially difficult to classify because of the many different ways that athletes choose to surf: some leg surf, kneeling or standing, while others use paddles or lie down. After classification, the next challenge is getting more women into the sport. Because of gender equality rules, there must be an equal number of men and women competing in order for a new sport to be considered to be added to the Olympics and Paralympics.



“For adaptive surfing, that’s a little more difficult,” says Nichols. “(A), there are fewer women with disabilities statistically, and (B), it’s rare to find a female with a disability who wants to go out and get into the big, blue, powerful ocean and surf waves. It’s too niche.”

Nichols hopes her story will encourage more women to get into the ocean and compete safely. Despite the obstacles, Nichols is committed to challenging herself and others. “I’ve been able to kind of create a different type of life,” she says. “I think that is really kind of intriguing and inspiring for others with disabilities.”

“We all have different bodies,” Nichols says. “Thanks to companies like Toyota that really believe in mobility, we can develop this amazing technology that creates independence for people. With the right technology in place, one step at a time, we can reach our impossible goals.”