

# Swimming Toward Change: Why Jessica Long Is Excited About the Future of the Paralympics

January 29, 2020



When Team Toyota athlete [Jessica Long](#) first learned about the Paralympics, she had only been swimming for two years. Her parents thought experiencing a competition would be a good learning opportunity for their energetic daughter, who is a double amputee.

“I really only went to the Paralympics swim meet to meet other people,” she says. “When I showed up to the trials, I saw all of these athletes that weren’t hiding their prosthetics at all. I’d never met anyone else like me before. It was so isolating. I felt like I was the only one in the world.”

Long was already scoring early wins in the water when she learned about the Paralympic trials from an official at a meet near her Baltimore, Maryland, hometown. Though she was working on a long-term plan with her coaches to train for the tryouts when she turned 16, Long and her family decided she would participate in the trials in 2004, when she was only 12.

“I mainly went to the team announcements to see some of the friends I had made during trials,” she says. “And then all of a sudden, they called my name. That was the start of it. Being the youngest on the team and then winning three golds — it really set the bar high.”

The Paralympic Games Athens 2004 were just the beginning. Today, Long is the second-most-decorated U.S. Paralympian in history, with 23 medals and four Paralympic Games under her belt. Now, the 27-year-old is training for her fifth consecutive Games and paving the way for para athletes around the world.



### **Finding Strength Through Sports**

By the time Long was beginning her athletic career, she'd already faced steep odds and seemingly impossible obstacles. Born with fibular hemimelia — a rare condition where the fibulas, ankles, heels and most of the bones in her feet were missing — Long's legs were amputated below the knees when she was 18 months old so she could be fitted for prosthetics.

Originally from Siberia, Long was adopted from a Russian orphanage at 13 months old by Steve and Beth Long.

An active child who showed an interest in athletics at a young age, starting with gymnastics, Long preferred to walk around without her prosthetics, causing her parents to worry about the potential damage to her knees. They told her that if she didn't want to wear them, she would have to find another sport.

"I'm most comfortable with my legs off," she says. "Back then, my legs were just really heavy and I didn't want to wear them. Because I was growing so much, they never had a good fit."

Long loved to swim in her grandparents' pool, which she could do without her prosthetics, so she joined the local swim team.

"I was the only girl without legs, the only disabled swimmer," she says. "But I loved the sport and it was really hard work. Growing up without my legs, I just wanted to fit in and feel capable and strong, and swimming made me feel all those things."

## **Making a Splash**

Two years after her earning three gold medals at the Paralympic Games Athens 2004, Long decided to become a professional athlete at the age of 14. While she recognizes the work of the other Paralympic athletes who came before her, there weren't many sponsorships available for para athletes at the time.

"After the world championships, I had this amazing opportunity to go pro," she says. "I loved being a Paralympic athlete, but I just didn't know what the future held. I didn't know if I could swim at a collegiate level. At the time, no one was really doing anything like that for amputees, so it just felt like this opportunity that I couldn't turn down."

Despite her early success in the pool, Long's career had its fair share of ups and downs. Growing up in the spotlight, the swimmer found herself confronting her life challenges publicly, from typical teenage growing pains to the unique circumstances of her amputation and adoption.

"I had a really hard time understanding my life," she says. "Particularly challenges of being an amputee. There was a while there when I was having surgery every three to six months. And I was still really curious about my adoption and where I came from, especially when I was a teenager."

Long believes some of this frustration and confusion fueled her success in the swim lane, but there was always a lingering need to prove that she was enough, a feeling she thinks is common among adoptees.

"When I was 16, I went to my second Paralympic Games [in Beijing], and I remember that I wanted to win seven gold medals, just like Mark Spitz," she says. "I was telling everyone. Everyone knew what my goal was."

On the third day of competition, Long took bronze in the 100-meter breaststroke. Her U.S. teammate beat her, breaking her record and shattering her world. Despite going home with four gold medals, a silver and a bronze, the young athlete was devastated.

"I think the first thing I said to my mom was, 'Do you and Dad still love me?'" she says. "I know it's ridiculous now, but I think being adopted, I just always had this worry about being enough."

After the Paralympic Games Beijing 2008, Long had a serious conversation about quitting the sport entirely.

"Everything was always my choice, my decision," she says. "My parents always said, 'If you want to go after it, then put in the work. But if you don't want to swim, we're not going to force you.' I ended up taking two weeks

off.”

Instead of quitting, she decided to make a lifestyle change and moved to the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, which she likens to her college experience. That’s when Long first noticed how much the Paralympic movement was starting to take off.



## Looking Ahead

As Long trains for her fifth Paralympic Games, she acknowledges how different the experience is preparing for 2020 than it was in 2004. The biggest differences, she says, are greater visibility and more opportunities for para athletes.

“What really makes me happy is how much the Paralympics are growing and how many people support the movement,” she says. “Sponsorships are a huge part of that. Being part of Team Toyota is something that I still can’t even believe. It makes me so excited for the next generation of athletes.”

Long believes the spotlight on the Paralympics creates awareness about disabilities in general. Thinking back to her 10-year-old self, still embarrassed to wear shorts that showed her prosthetics, she acknowledges how much her Paralympic experience changed her life.

“We’re all so different. We all have our own challenges and face different adversities, some more visible than

others,” she says. “But when we talk about them and share experiences, people don’t feel so alone. As a 10-year-old little girl, all I wanted in the world was to meet another amputee.”

“The Paralympics are this place where you feel like you’re at home,” she says. “It’s a place that *welcomes* disability. And I still can’t believe how much the event has grown — I’m so excited for what’s next.”

To learn more about Jessica Long, [click here](#)