

Team Toyota Paratriathlete Brad Snyder Dives into New Waters

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In the fall of 2011, Team Toyota Paralympic athlete Brad Snyder was serving in Afghanistan as a United States Navy explosive ordnance disposal officer, when he stepped on an improvised explosive device, leaving him blinded. One year later, fitted with prosthetic eyes, Snyder, a long-time competitive swimmer, returned to the pool, claiming gold in the men's S11 400-meter freestyle event at the Paralympic Games London 2012. Among fully blind swimmers, he is the world record holder in 100-meter freestyle events.

Snyder competed in his second Paralympic Games in Rio 2016. Deciding he'd accomplished his top goals in swimming, he transitioned from swimming and is hoping to compete for gold in paratriathlon next summer in Tokyo.

In celebration of Olympic & Paralympic Day presented by Toyota, plus National Triathlon Week, Toyota checked in with Snyder to find out what he's been up to lately. Though the Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 have been postponed, not surprisingly Snyder, never one to lose momentum, is continuing to start his impossible every day.

“I love that feeling when you’ve never done something before.”

After your injury, how, in just a year’s time, were you able to win a gold medal?

For me, the experience wasn’t losing my vision. It was a lot different. I thought that I had died. I lay on the ground thinking there was no way I could survive. But I *did* get the chance to come back and be with my family. So, I always start from a place of gratitude. Second, the military prepares you well for being dedicated to a craft and to be disciplined. Every day in the military offers a new skill set to figure out. I learned about chemistry and scuba diving. It’s humbling that you don’t know about everything, but you work toward it. I had never been blind before, but I knew there were tools, techniques and skills, so that I could live with being blind. I also wanted to show my family that everything was going to be fine.

Four years ago, you shifted from swimming to paratriathlon. Tell us about your new training schedule given the current situation.

I don’t have my own pool, but I do wish I did. I haven’t been able to swim since March 13 [when much of the U.S. went into lockdown in response to the COVID-19 crisis]. But I train every day. Training can be a lot of different things. It’s also important to maintain my mental skills – meditation, reading, learning new things.

How did you make the transition into paratriathlon?

After Rio, I wasn’t 100% sure what I was going to do with my athletic career. I felt like retiring. I felt strong, but like something needed to be done. So, I’ve been training and competing as a triathlete since 2017. I love that feeling when you’ve never done something before.

Do you swim with goggles?

I always swim with goggles. The rule is that I have to wear blacked-out goggles. The refs even check the goggles to make sure they are completely blacked out.

How do you know when to flip in the pool?

When I’m swimming in the pool, I count my strokes. It tells me where in the lane I am. 34 – 39 strokes on a good run; 42 – 43 strokes when I’m tired. My teammate or coach stand on the side of pool with a long stick with a tennis ball on the end. They’ll tap me on the back with the pole when I’m six feet away from the wall. That’s when I lean over to do the flip turn. We practice that movement over and over again. The turns in Rio were a reflection of that work.

What is your tip for swimming straight in backstroke?

Being present with where I am and to feel as symmetrical as I can. It’s a balance between the pole on each side. It requires quite a bit of crashing in training. I’ll get cuts and bruises in practice from hitting the lane line. I train that feel so I can be confident at speed.

When you’re in a triathlon, how do you know where you’re going?

I have a guide who I'm tethered to for the entire race. Most guides have experience as triathletes. In water, we have a bungee cord. On land, my guide can say "go left, right, straight." The guide can pull with his hips through the 5K portion of the race. It's been an interesting transition.

Because you have non-24 sleep-wake disorder, how do you adjust to time zones when you compete internationally?

My strategy on jet lag: pretend there is no jet lag. Never nap in the first 24-hour period. Typically, get to the city a day early for every hour change. Because I don't see light and dark, I don't produce melatonin, so I go to bed and wake up around the same time. I use a white noise maker to go to bed, and use ear plugs to keep the noise out. It's all in the sleep-hygiene tactics.

What motivates you to compete at the highest level?

A sense of responsibility. In the military, my job was to locate explosive hazards and mitigate them to protect our forces. I no longer have the ability to wear the uniform, but I have the ability to swim. It's my way of serving. I feel strong and passionate about the desire to fulfill that duty. It's my motivation to go back to school, and to see myself as a leader in the community. It's my job to bridge the gap, bring people together and inspire the community to serve each other. It's my duty to my country.

What's your next goal to accomplish?

I just got accepted into Princeton to get my Ph.D. in Public Policy, specifically focusing on the relationship the military has with the overall population. I'm taking classes on Zoom. My goal is to get straight A's for the next five years at Princeton.

When you aren't doing all of that, do you like to collect cool things?

Gold medals! I also collect sand from all the different places I've been. Iraq, Florida, Afghanistan. I collect flags, too. I'm nuts about the American flag.