

Brad Snyder Is Always on the Move

April 14, 2021



Team Toyota athlete Brad Snyder believes that an injury to the body is an injury to the identity. So, after losing his eyesight when he stepped on an improvised explosive device while serving on his second deployment in Afghanistan, the Navy veteran knew that he would need to shift his mindset to a recovery focused on his entire well-being so that he could heal the body and soul.

Snyder says, “Exercise is certainly critical to your physical recovery. It’s good for your body. But sports are good for your brain. Sports help you find value in something, something other than your military career.”

It was through his previous identity as a swimmer that the veteran restored his sense of self. Snyder, who swam competitively during his time at the United States Naval Academy, returned to the pool as a part of his recovery.

“After my injury, I knew that there was just no way life could return to normal. One, I’m blind. Two, I couldn’t do my job anymore. Three, the foundations of your life, your career, your identity, your family, all that stuff, are really shaken after something like that,” says Snyder.

And exactly a year to the date of his accident, Snyder won his first gold medal at the Paralympic Games London 2012 in the 400-meter freestyle. He also won gold that year in the 100-meter freestyle and silver in the 50-meter freestyle. Now, training for his third consecutive Paralympic Games, Snyder is ready to evolve again:

competing in paratriathlon.

Says Snyder, “I find a bit of solace in shifting the challenge. My journey to my first Paralympics had a lot to do with personal transformation, but there’s more for me to learn. I want to try something new and see if there is more for me to accomplish.”



A New Normal

If losing his sight shattered Snyder’s identity, swimming offered a strong chance to regain a sense of continuum. Growing up in St. Petersburg, Florida, Snyder had a long history in the water, as he swam and body surfed at the beach with his family. When his father suggested it was time for him to take up a team sport, Snyder chose competitive swimming, thinking he was already pretty good. Was this the case?

“Nope,” he says. “I was the worst kid in the pool. But I fell in love with swimming pretty quickly because the sport has such a quick payoff. When you work hard, things start to happen. And after a few weeks, I was able to keep up.”

Snyder continued swimming through high school and college, where he was captain of the United States Naval Academy’s swim team. But he retired from competitive swimming after graduating in 2006 and began his Navy service, where he was eventually promoted to lieutenant. Once Snyder’s life changed after the accident in 2011,

he spent three weeks of intensive care at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland and then at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital back home in Tampa, Florida, for the rest of his recovery.

“In the tumult after an injury, after getting out of the hospital, you're really grasping onto any sense of normalcy you possibly can,” he says. “And since I was home at the time, my mom and brothers, who were all swimmers, and old swimming friends, were visiting me. The whole community saw me as one of them.”

Eight weeks later, the hospital allowed Snyder to leave on weekends. By now, his ears were healed enough to begin swimming again and running outdoors.

“My old high school swim coach, Fred Lewis, was like, ‘Hey, do you want to come by practice on Saturday?’ Just like it was a normal, everyday thing,” Snyder says. “He was the first one to adapt anything for me, even though he didn't know para swimming.”

A long-time coach who teaches all levels of athletes, including Olympians, Lewis wasn't familiar with adaptive swimming. To start, the coach looped a rope through a pool noodle and would set it just far enough from each wall so Snyder couldn't hurt himself. Wearing a full scuba mask to protect his healing eyes, and with a lane line on each side, Snyder dived back into his swimming career.

“When I showed up on the pool deck, my coach just threw this stuff at me as though it was a regular old Saturday morning like, ‘Here's your workout,’” he says. “It gave me this little thread that I could cling to and show everyone—my family—that everything was going to be okay.”



Onto the Next

From that starting point and after two Paralympic Games, Snyder has moved quickly from that pool noodle to five gold and two silver medals. Now, his primary focus is competing in paratriathlon for Tokyo 2020.

Like triathlon, paratriathlon is a multisport race that includes swimming, cycling and running. Snyder competes in the PTVI class for visually impaired athletes, meaning he competes with a guide and uses a tandem bicycle.

In the beginning, the paratriathlon community was very welcoming to Snyder, but a two-year transition was required before he felt ready to commit fully to the new, complicated sport. Now, he's found the right guide, secured a better bike and has incrementally worked his way to a place where he feels like he could not just make the team, but make the podium as well.

But as Snyder well knows, the medal count is only part of the story—and certainly not the biggest part. Though a seasoned Paralympian with more confidence, his training for Tokyo looks a little different than it has for past Games.

“I recently got married, so my wife and I are adapting our worlds towards Tokyo together,” he says. “She’s never been through this before because I didn’t know her when I went to London or when I went to Rio. Doing this as a couple, as opposed to doing it as an individual, carries new meaning.”

Family is a vital component to his success and helps him stay motivated through the long hours of training. Most days, Snyder’s wife Sara even trains with him.

“She holds me accountable,” he says. “There are days where I’ll hit the alarm and think, we’ve been really busy; we could use an extra half hour of sleep. Right off the bat, she’ll ask me, ‘Do you want to be a champion?’ She’s right there every step of the way.”

A Positive Message

That refusal to give up is part of what Snyder sees as the platform he’s been given to help others who might be struggling.

“It’s important to me to carry a positive message,” he says. “To inspire people to push past their boundaries, to inspire people to say, ‘You know what? Adversity is going to happen, no matter what, so I have to get good at navigating that adversity.’”

Snyder hopes his story will inspire others to take on challenges that may seem impossible from the outside, and to experience the emotional growth that lies within physical tests.

“You don’t have to be a Paralympic champion for that identity to shift,” he says. “Being an athlete is one way to recover your identity, which is so important. It doesn’t have to be sports, but being able to say, ‘I’m a hand cyclist or I’m a sled hockey player’ is a way for you to rehab and recover your identity as much as it is to recover from the wounds themselves.”