Steve Serio Inspires Others to Go Further, Together

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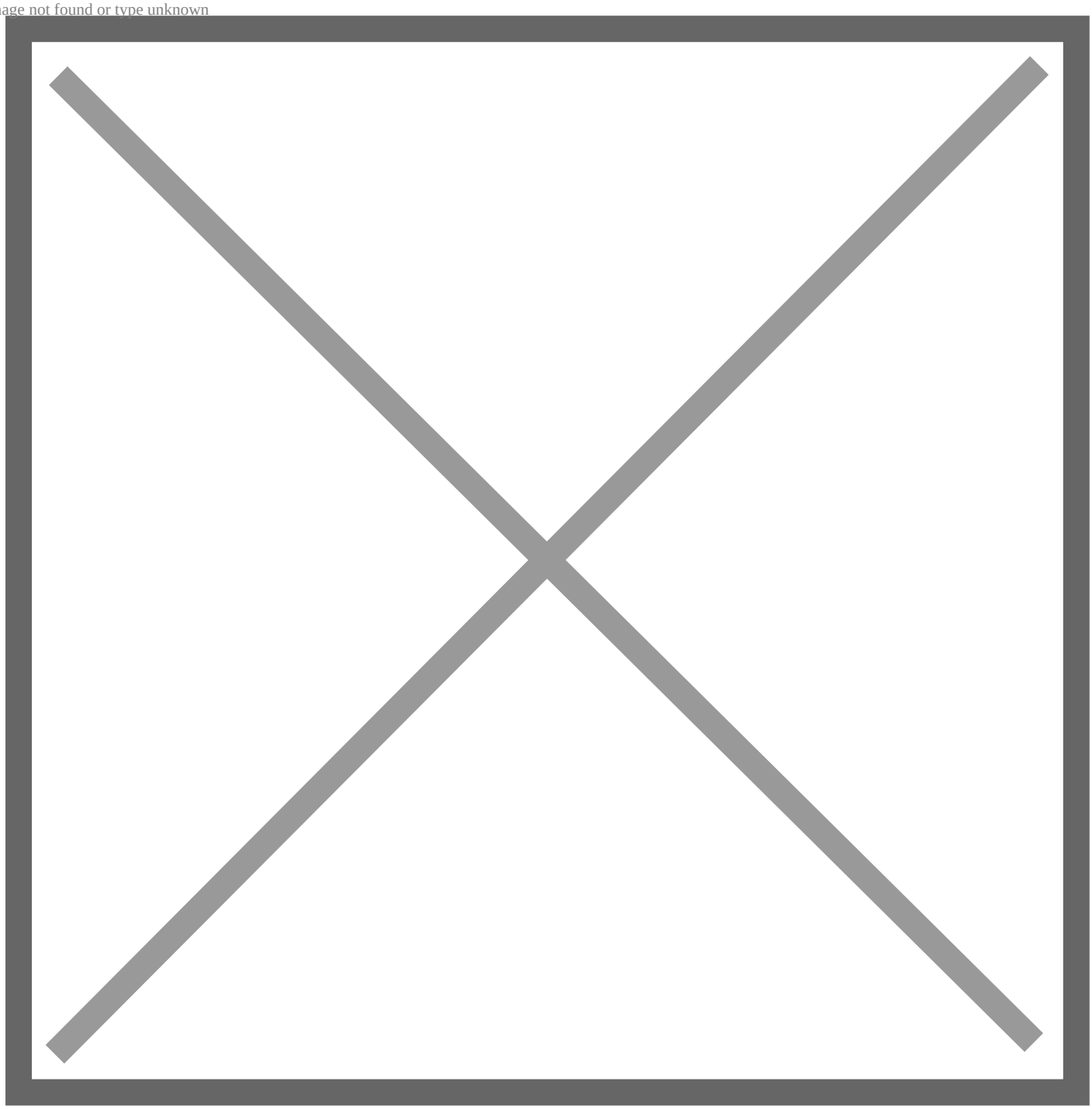


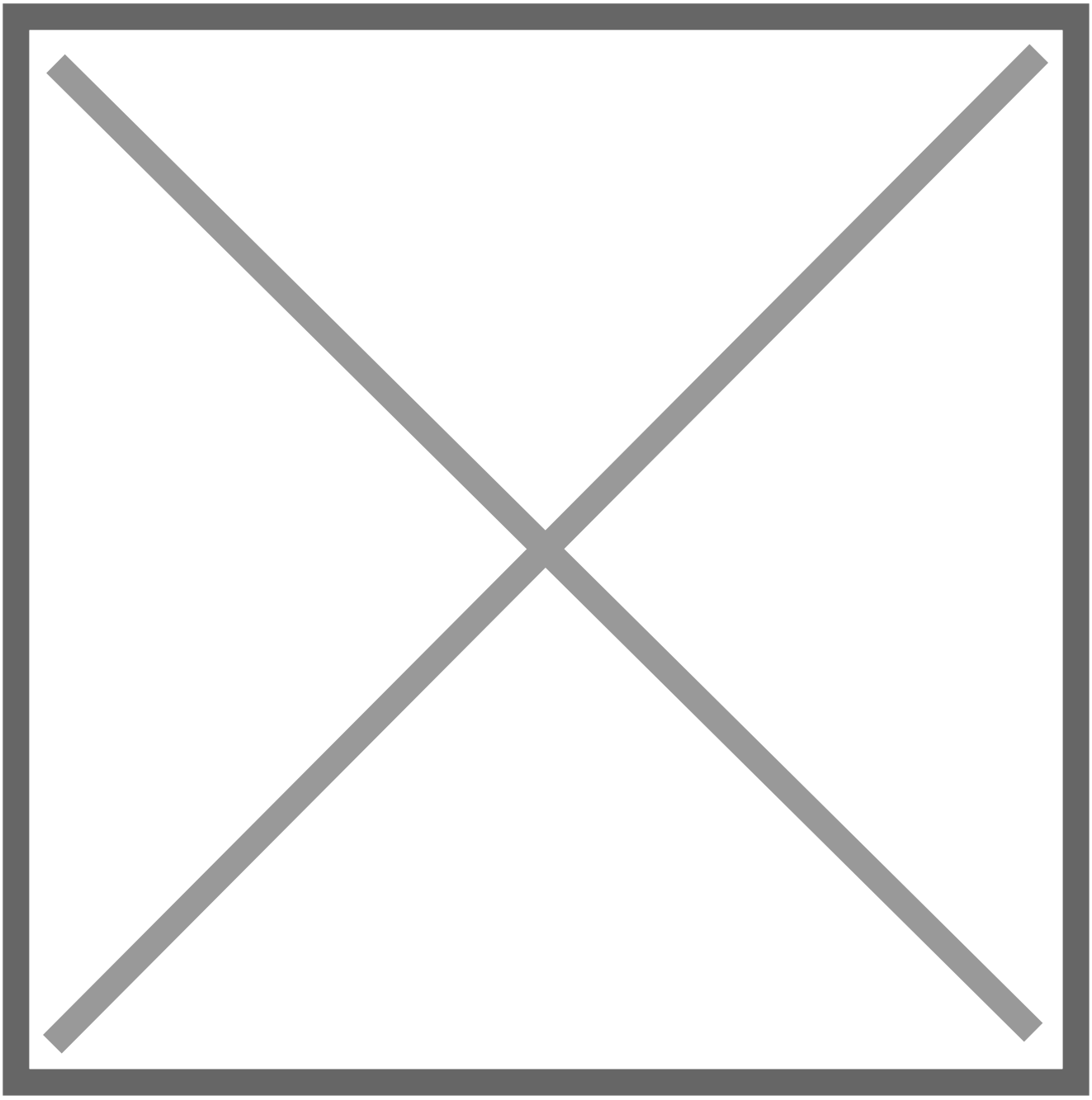
There’s a saying, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” For Steve Serio, a three-time Paralympian wheelchair basketball player, championing the latter is what makes him a leader.

Growing up in Westbury, New York, Serio never felt like he had a disability. At 11 months old, he was diagnosed with a benign spinal tumor. The surgery to remove it resulted in the compression of his spinal cord, which left him paralyzed. Despite the circumstance, Serio was a natural-born athlete who would join his friends in playing able-bodied sports—with a few tweaks to the rules.

“That’s basically what sports meant to me growing up,” says Serio. “It was a 100% inclusive activity.”

However, when Serio was 14, the school he was attending told him that he could no longer compete due to safety and liability reasons. Fortunately, there was a wheelchair basketball team that competed just 10 minutes away from where he lived. Unfamiliar with the team, Serio went to meet the Long Island Lightning and find out more about wheelchair basketball. It was that moment, meeting the team, that put him on the inevitable path to gold.

“I remember sitting in a basketball wheelchair for the first time, and I know it might sound a little dramatic, but it was the first time in my life I ever felt free from my disability,” says Serio. “I’m just so grateful that I found it.”



A Lesson in Leadership

Serio’s time with the Long Island Lightning would be one for the record books. In 2005, just two years after joining the team, he led them to their first national championship and was named the tournament MVP. That same year, he was one of 12 players nationwide to represent the United States in the Australian Junior National Games for the Disabled in Sydney. He also then went on to play on a USA U-23 team that competed in the World Championships in England.

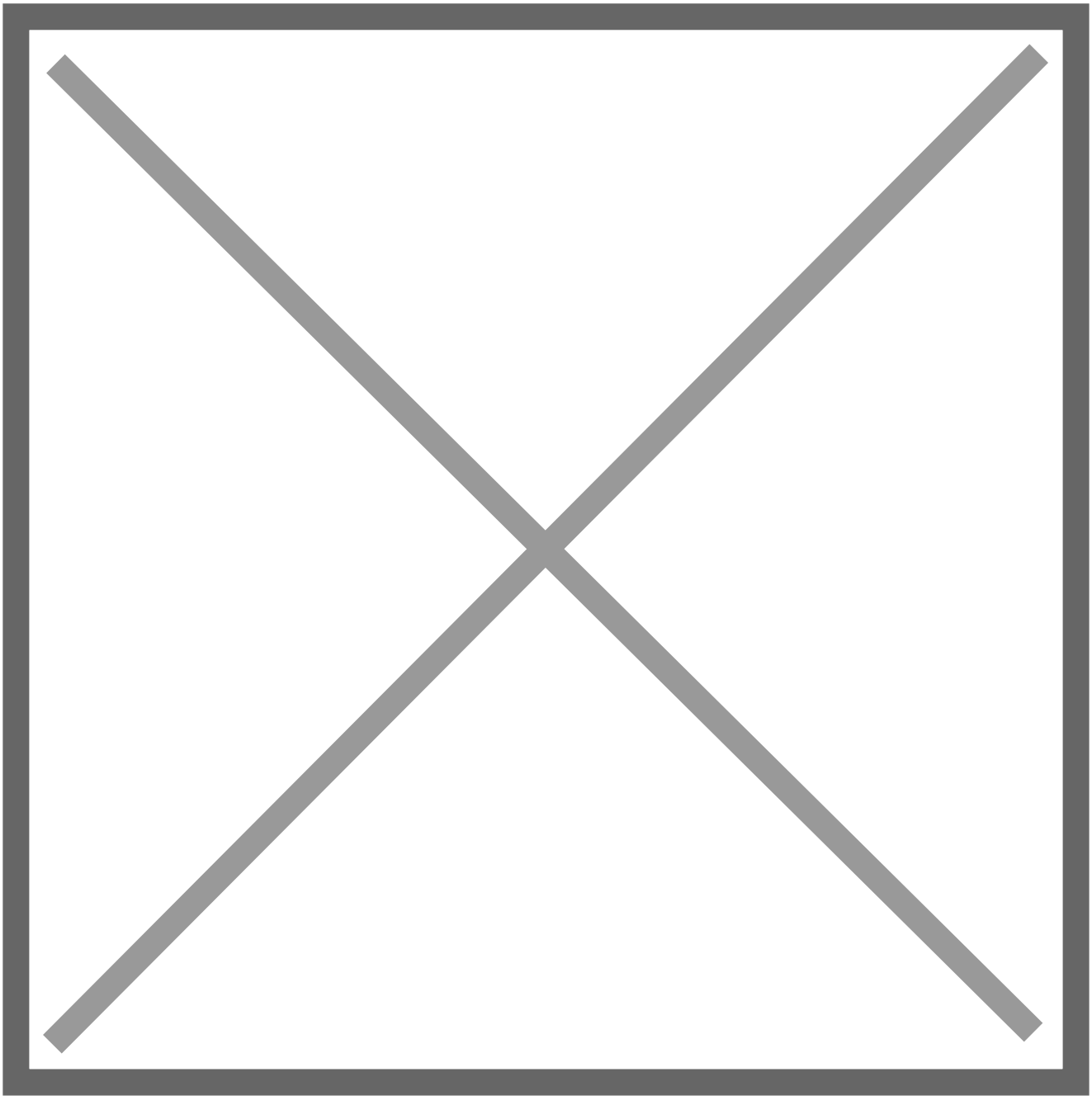
“It was definitely a great checkpoint and great stepping-stone for me,” says Serio. “To win a national championship with your friends and these kids that are at the same point in their lives as you — it’s an amazing

feeling I'll always remember."

In the years to follow, Serio would go on to play point guard at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which has its own wheelchair basketball program. There, he would once again lead the team to a national championship and be awarded Championship Player of the Game, National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) tournament MVP and the NWBA's 31st National Intercollegiate Wheelchair Basketball Tournament Player of the Year.

It was during this time that Serio joined the U.S. Paralympic Men's Wheelchair Basketball Team. Making the team was a massive milestone in Serio's career, but it wasn't without its setbacks. At the Paralympic Games Beijing 2008, which was Serio's Paralympic debut, the U.S. team just missed the podium, coming in fourth. At the following Paralympic Games London 2012, the team came even closer, winning bronze. In 2016, however, co-captain Serio led Team USA to their first gold medal in wheelchair basketball since 1988. In doing so, he learned a valuable lesson about what it means to be a leader.

"Being a good leader is a constant practice. It's not like you wake up one day and all of a sudden you're a good leader," says Serio. "It's how you inspire the people around you to become better athletes, better coaches, better people. It's inspiring them to accomplish goals that are bigger than themselves."



Joining the Team

Going into the Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020, Serio joins Team Toyota and fellow Paralympians as they break down barriers, defy odds and overcome physical limitations. In doing so, they're challenging the status quo and inspiring people across the world to do the same.

"The work that Toyota is doing with their Mobility for All mentality and their Start Your Impossible campaign correlates so well with the Paralympics and Paralympians," says Serio. "To go into a Paralympic year with a sponsor that you truly care about, standing behind you and supporting you — I feel a deep connection with the message."

As Serio aims to lead Team USA, once again, to the top spot on the podium in Tokyo, he reflects on what it means to be a leader, not just on the court, but in his community. Being on Team USA is a massive honor for Serio because he’s not just representing his country, but also his friends, his family and those who aren’t able to compete in the Games beside him. For him, the biggest honor that comes from being a leader is inspiring others to go further, together.

“We can inspire people, and not only just with disabilities, but people all across the world to demand more from this life,” says Serio. “And hopefully, it’ll be a better world and a better society for it.”