

Oksana Masters Is Shifting Gears Toward Tokyo 2020 & Beijing 2022

August 16, 2021

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When Team Toyota athlete Oksana Masters tried out for Team USA for the first time in 2008, a U.S. national rowing coach said her goals were unrealistic. The coach told Masters, who is a double amputee, that she'd never row at a competitive level — she was too small and didn't look like an athlete.

“I wanted to prove that coach wrong,” she says. “A lot of kids grow up watching Michael Jordan or Serena Williams and they know they can aspire to that level. But I wanted to prove that athletes don't have to look like them, someone tall and fit. All bodies can be athletic bodies.”

Ultimately, Masters didn't make the team as a rower for the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games. But she stayed motivated, both in the pursuit of her personal goals and to keep pushing for visibility in Paralympic sports.

“As a kid with no legs, it was hard to have a vision for myself in athletics,” she says. “Seeing is believing. You have to see it to know you can do it. That's why it's so important to me that the Paralympics are televised now and showcase diverse groups of athletes like never before.”

Today, Masters has participated in four Paralympic Games competing in four different sports across summer and winter: rowing, Nordic skiing, biathlon and cycling. With eight medals under her belt, the versatile Paralympian has unfinished business that she's looking to settle at Tokyo 2020 with a podium finish in cycling.

Finding Freedom in Movement

Masters was born in Ukraine and experienced several radiation-related birth defects from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. She was ultimately diagnosed with Tibial Hemimelia — a condition where the tibia (shinbone) is shorter than normal or missing altogether. Over the course of seven years, she would have both legs amputated above the knee and be fitted for prosthetics.

“I don't usually say ‘disability,’” she says. “It's not a disability. I just had different circumstances with my body.”

The Paralympian lived in three orphanages in Ukraine before being adopted at the age of 7 by her mother, Gay. When Masters first arrived in America, she only spoke Ukrainian and Russian and had no exposure to athletics. The first sport she ever tried was ice skating while living in Buffalo, New York.

“I was in shock,” she says. “I was a kid with big eyes. We were never hugged or got that kind of treatment when I was in the orphanage. There was so much I hadn't experienced.”



When she was 13, Gay and Oksana moved to her mom's hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, where the young athlete started horseback riding. But after the surgery on her second leg, she couldn't continue riding during her recovery. That's when she started rowing with the urging of her mom to try it out.

"At first, I didn't want to do adaptive sports," she says. "I didn't think I should have to do a different sport just because I was missing legs. But my mom was really persistent and said, 'Just try it. You never know.' And she was right."

Masters says the day she walked down the dock and sat in a boat for the first time changed her life forever. Feeling the boat sway beneath her — and the ability to control it — gave her the freedom of movement.

“I loved it because I could pull on the oars as hard as I could and release so much anger and frustration,” she says. “I had let those feelings get pent up and I had never let them out. Rowing became therapy for me and helped me become stronger and more confident.”

A Natural Athlete

While Masters threw herself into rowing, it took some time for the young athlete to find her stride. After being cut from tryouts for Team USA in 2008, she struggled to qualify for a World Cup team until 2011.

“I was always naturally competitive,” she says. “I had amazing support in Kentucky. I had the right boat, and two coaches helped me. As long as I put in the time and showed that hunger, they put the time in with me.”

In 2012, her athletic career took off. Masters competed in her first Paralympic Games as a rower in London, where she won bronze — the first-ever U.S. medal in trunk and arm mixed double sculls. She immediately began skiing once the Games were over, training for 14 months leading up to the Paralympic Winter Games Sochi 2014, where she won a silver and a bronze medal in 12km Nordic and 5km Nordic, respectively.

Then, Masters injured her back skiing in the 2013 World Championships. In order to continue rowing, she would need rods put in her back — a surgery no doctor would perform on a double amputee because of the potential risks. Masters was forced to retire from the sport.

“I used to call rowing my wedding dress,” she says. “It was the one, my sport. I loved it. Now looking back, it was really my first true love. It will always be there, but as the path that led me towards the other sports I was meant to do.”



The Road Ahead

For Masters, the solo nature of handcycling and skiing present new challenges. As a rower, she could always rely on her partner, Rob Jones, but in cycling and skiing, it's all up to her.

"In rowing, all I knew was doubles," she says. "I knew to stay in a straight line and race. Cycling is not that at all. It's all on you. It's not about just putting your head down and hammering through. It's about tactics. It's not just about the strongest person, it's about the smartest person."

Masters believes that cycling challenges her in a way that rowing didn't. There are times during a race when she needs to be aggressive, and other times when she sits back and lets the bike do the work.

"It's sort of the exact opposite of what I think my personality is," she says. "I just want to be aggressive and attack everything. But I'm learning to harness that energy and bring it out at the right time. I'm learning that sometimes you just need to get into a tuck, connect your turns and coast."

Masters is relying on that flexible attitude more than ever, as she simultaneously trains for her Nordic season and Beijing 2022 while looking ahead to Tokyo 2020. Luckily, staying busy suits her restless personality.

"I'm physically present for the workouts I need to do for snow, but in my mind, I'm thinking about the bike workout," she says. "I'm thinking about riding and the races and Tokyo. When I'm skiing, I relive the cycling race in Rio where I got fourth and fifth and I think about the exact mistakes I made and how to fix them."

"My mind is just go, go, go," she says. "Even back when I lived in the orphanage, my mind has always been geared to the future and the life I wanted. I guess that turned into me always being a dreamer. I'm always thinking about how things can be better two years from now."

To learn more about Beijing 2022 click [here](#).