

Andrew Kurka Turns an Altered Dream into Gold

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Para alpine skier and Team Toyota athlete [Andrew Kurka](#) had dreamed of competing in the Olympics since he was just a little kid. But he originally envisioned himself standing on the podium winning gold as a wrestler.

“I once had a wrestling coach that told me to not get complacent because there would always be someone better,” Kurka says. “And when he said that, I knew I wanted to win Olympic gold so I would know without a doubt there was no one better. And that stayed with me through it all, that no matter what, I can still pursue being the best in the world.”

Then, Kurka’s dream was altered. A competitive wrestler since he was eight years old, Kurka was a six-time Alaska state champion in freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling. But when he was 13, an ATV accident severely damaged three vertebrae in the middle of his spinal cord, leaving Kurka partially paralyzed from the waist down.

“Sports and competition were a huge part of my life growing up,” he says. “I really found my identity through wrestling. After I broke my back, I had to find this new identity: Who is Andrew Kurka? Then I realized that I could still be who I was before. I decided to be proud of who I am, and that even though I’ve broken my back, I’m still going to go after what I love in life.”

For two years after the accident, Kurka tested out a few different adaptive sports before trying mono-skiing for the first time through a program called Challenge Alaska, which helps improve the lives of people with disabilities and their families through adaptive sports and therapeutic recreation. In 2010, he made the U.S. Paralympic National Team for the first time and competed in the Winter Paralympic Games in 2014 and 2018 – winning gold at PyeongChang 2018 in the downhill and silver in the super-G.

“Once I decided skiing was for me, that’s all I did,” Kurka says. “I started living my life fearlessly. I just chased alpine skiing with everything I had and made Team USA in three years, and now here I am with Team Toyota.”

A Growth Mindset

Heading into what will hopefully be his third Paralympic Games in Beijing, Kurka believes his experience has led to some personal growth over the years. His fearless mentality has helped him excel in the sport, but it also led to a lot of injuries at the beginning of his career.

“My attitude was just like, 110% or nothing,” he says. “Since then, I’ve learned to use my experience a little more and ask myself, ‘Should I give 110%? Should I give 10%? Should I give 70%?’ That growth took a lot of work.”

Kurka says that a big part of this growth came from accepting the parts of the sport that he can’t change. Alpine skiing is an outdoor sport, meaning there are a lot of variables that are different depending on the course. As an example, Kurka cites one of his first races with the Paralympic team, at a World Cup in France. It was a very fast course, but there was a strong headwind. Kurka was one of the first athletes out of the gate, beating some 30 other racers that came down after him — until the wind stopped.



“I was in first and then everyone else beat me by like four seconds,” he says. “That’s *a lot*. But I had a realization that that’s what this sport is. You can go out and do your best, and sometimes your best isn’t good enough for the contest, but your best should always be good enough for yourself.”

Now, the Paralympian has adjusted his mindset: It’s not all about winning anymore — it’s about doing the best he can. Each time he skis, Kurka hopes to grow as an individual, not just as a skier, but in all aspects of his life.

“I just want to be a little better than I was before,” he says. “Mentally, physically or emotionally. I want to grow from the sport, and I think, at least for me personally, you learn things that can be implemented into other facets of life.”

Growing the Games

While Kurka has seen a lot of personal growth since the start of his athletic career, he’s also witnessed the evolution of the Paralympic Games. According to Kurka, growing the Paralympics is important because often, Paralympians don’t have access to the same opportunities that Olympians do. Plus, para-athletes, like mono skiers, often rely on expensive equipment. So, every bit of the spotlight helps.

“When I first got into the Paralympics, I just wanted to be on the same tier as any other Olympic athlete,” Kurka says. “And throughout my career, I have realized that’s not something that’s just going to happen; it needs to be actively changed.”

One thing Kurka thinks makes a difference is believing in the athletes. Though he thinks more progress needs to be made, spectators, networks and sponsors are starting to see the hard work and incredible stories of the Paralympians.

“The beautiful thing about the Paralympics is the adversity and things that people face and what they have to overcome,” he says. “These athletes have to grow to get here, and I think that’s something that’s starting to be seen.”