

Alana Nichols Pushes Past the Impossible With No Signs of Slowing Down

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Paralympic champion [Alana Nichols](#) has learned a lot about herself in the almost 20 years since she broke her back in a snowboarding accident. At the time, the Team Toyota athlete thought her athletic career was over, but it was only the beginning.

“Looking back, breaking my back was actually one of the best things that ever happened to me,” Nichols says. “And I think that’s the case for a lot of Paralympic athletes. Once you find your mobility again, it’s really a joy to figure out how to use your body.”

Nichols has been an athlete since she was a five-year-old on her town’s T-ball team in Farmington, New Mexico. She played three sports throughout junior high and high school and was an avid snowboarder until her accident. After her injury, Nichols didn’t really know what her athletic options were until one day, as a student at the University of New Mexico, she cut through the gym and saw people playing wheelchair basketball.

“I saw a whole team of people playing five-on-five wheelchair basketball and just couldn’t believe my eyes,” she says. “That was a pivotal moment for me because I couldn’t unsee how active, talented and hardworking people with disabilities could be.”

In that moment, Nichols’ perspective changed about what she could and couldn’t do as someone in a wheelchair. She decided to work toward being one of the best in the world. Nichols earned a scholarship to play wheelchair basketball at the University of Arizona before being recruited to the University of Alabama, where she earned her master’s degree. In 2008, she graduated with a master’s in kinesiology and won a gold medal at the Paralympic Games in Beijing — all in one summer.



Beijing 2008 was a catalyst for Nichols' athletic career. The win gave her the confidence to expand her options. Soon after, she relocated to Colorado to try para alpine skiing. At the Vancouver 2010 Paralympic Winter Games, Nichols became the first U.S. female Paralympian to win gold at both summer (wheelchair basketball) and winter (para alpine skiing) Paralympic Games. She went on to compete in a total of five Paralympic Games — winning a total of six Paralympic medals, even after taking up sprint kayaking, which she qualified to compete in at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games.

“I’ve gotten to try everything,” she says. “That’s a really cool part of the adaptive community. I think because we’re limited in so many ways, when we do have the opportunity to do something, we’re going to do things that we wouldn’t normally do.”

Even though Nichols isn’t actively training to qualify for Beijing 2022, she’s still involved in the Paralympic Movement, working with organizers on the upcoming Olympic and Paralympic Games in Los Angeles, California, or LA28. And with any luck, her Paralympic career will continue: Nichols is advocating to get surfing introduced as the newest Paralympic sport.

“It’s been an incredible ride,” she says. “I’ve gotten to do so many amazing things as a Paralympic athlete. I’ve had a lot of ‘pinch me’ moments and I’m just so grateful for the whole experience.”

Embracing a New Role

Nichols didn’t compete as an athlete at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, but she did attend the Games where she made her debut as an onsite reporter for NBC. A big topic of conversation during her interviews with the athletes was the impact of the global pandemic on sports. For some athletes, the delays gave them more time to recover from an injury or focus on their training, but for others, the mental impact of the time off took a toll.

“COVID affected sports on basically every level,” she says. “I think it gave some people the opportunity to prove how resilient they really are. I know that from my experiences and setbacks, there’s no way you can actually know what you’re capable of without experiencing challenges and proving how strong you are.”

The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games looked a little different compared to the Games that Nichols competed in, so she wasn’t totally sure what to expect. She ended up loving her experience broadcasting on behalf of NBC and was surprised to find that the energy of the Games was still palpable, even with no fans in the stands.

“I really enjoyed learning about broadcasting,” she says. “I could put myself in the athlete’s shoes and understood how they might feel after the game. I also really believe that representation matters. People with disabilities should be represented in the media, so it was a great experience to be a part of the NBC crew that went to Japan.”

As a Paralympian for more than a decade, Nichols has witnessed firsthand the impact representation can have on the Paralympic Movement. During her first Games in 2008, the women’s championship wheelchair basketball game — in which Team USA won gold — wasn’t even televised. At the Vancouver 2010 Paralympic Winter Games, Nichols won two gold medals, a silver and a bronze, but her accomplishments were the subject of little to no media coverage. Those experiences contrasted with what she witnessed in Tokyo, and it makes her very excited for the future of the Paralympic Games.

“In Tokyo, we saw more Paralympic coverage than ever before,” she says. “There were 1,200 hours of really exciting Paralympic coverage. We have a long way to go and there are plenty of things that need to change before we feel true equality, but it feels like every cycle we make huge strides as a Paralympic Movement.”

Eyes on LA28

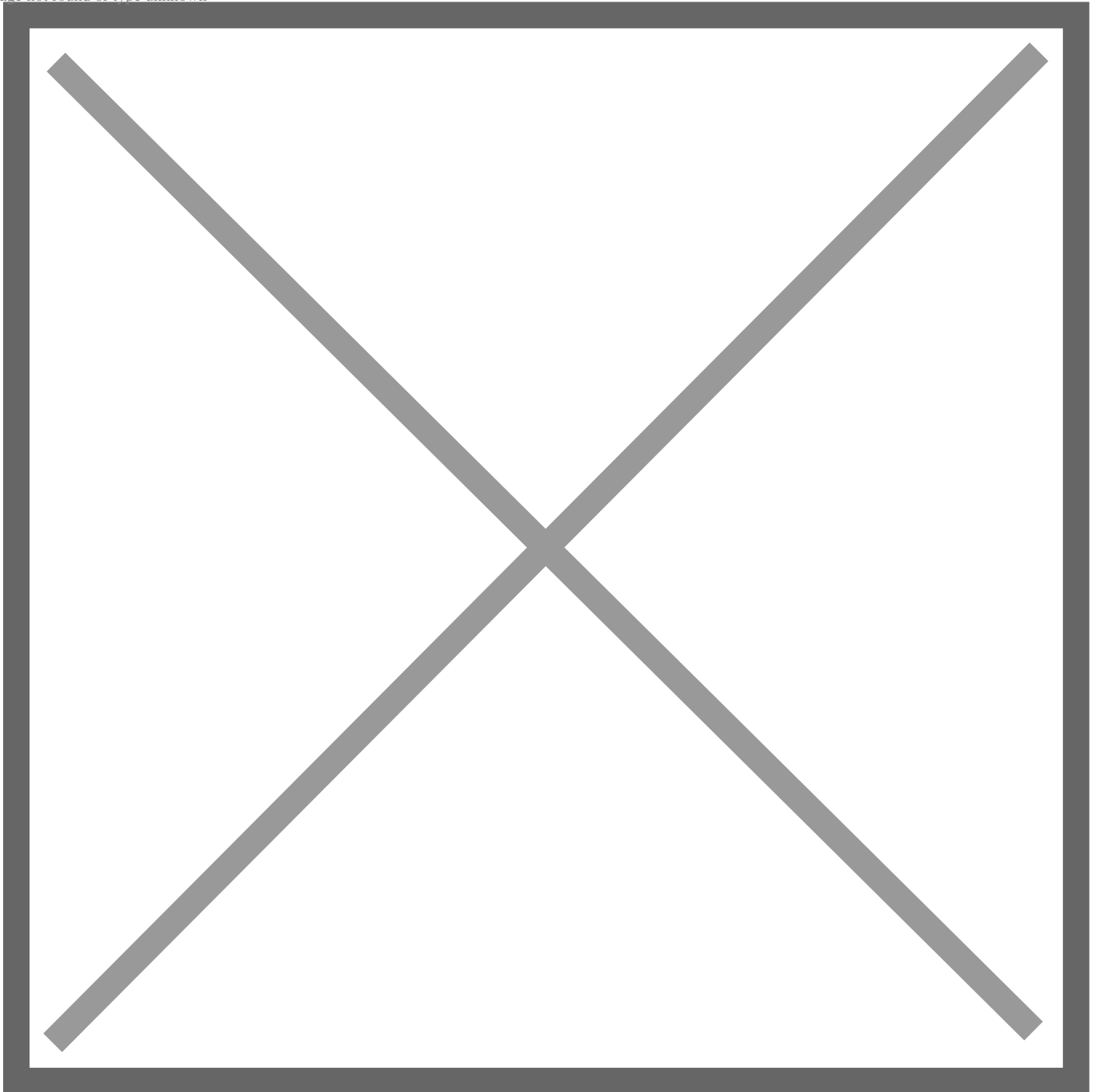
Following the Paralympic Winter Games Sochi 2014, Nichols was on vacation with her grandmother in Hawaii when she discovered AccessSurf, an organization that supports people with disabilities in learning how to surf. Immediately, she knew she had to try it.

“I’ve always loved learning new sports and the challenge that comes with the adaption aspect of figuring them out,” she says. “When I learned about surfing, I couldn’t wait to find the right surfboard, adapt it to my needs,

and figure out how to be one of the best surfers in the world.”

Five years after learning how to surf, her goal of being the best surfer is still a work in progress. According to Nichols, surfing is one of the hardest things she’s ever done of all the sports she’s tried.

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“The ocean does not discriminate,” she says. “It doesn’t care if you’re disabled or not — it will beat you up. It really helps build my character in ways that I’ve never experienced before because sometimes you get out of the ocean and think you’re making progress, and then the next time you feel like you have no idea what you’re

doing.”

Like many adaptive sports, adaptive surfing requires athletes to have access to expensive equipment, meaning people with disabilities often rely on organizations like AccessSurf; the Challenge Athletes Foundation; Stoke for Life; and Nichols’ husband’s nonprofit, the High Fives Foundation. When Nichols fell in love with surfing, she realized that other people who are disabled could love it too, if they had the resources.

“I’ve just tried to be an ambassador for the sport in general,” she says. “I serve on the board at the International Surfing Association and we’re doing everything we can to grow the sport in numbers, to create opportunities for people to try it for the first time. Ultimately, we’re hoping to get it into the 2028 Games as a new sport.”

Nichols believes that big events and competitions, like those hosted by nonprofits for adaptive sports, are how people discover new sports. In addition, the debut of surfing at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 has been a significant help to the Paralympic cause.

“Surfing was one of the most-viewed sports in the Olympics,” she says. “That really sets the Paralympic possibilities up for us. We’re just grateful for everything that the Olympic surfing team did to pave the way for the Paralympics to do the same.”

As excited as Nichols is for the future of the Paralympic Games, she’s keeping her eyes on LA28. In addition to her work to get adaptive surfing certified as an official Paralympic sport, Nichols is also a member of the LA28 Athletes’ Commission — a group of 18 athletes (nine Olympians and nine Paralympians) who will bring essential insights and perspectives to create an inclusive, innovation and seamless athlete experience at the LA28 Games.

“Our job is to really have a voice in the development process,” Nichols says. “Specifically, I’m looking out for the Paralympians in general. Thinking about accessibility needs, overall experiences in the athlete village and the venues, making sure those things are universally designed.”

“I think L.A. is going to do a great job, and I’m looking forward to hosting the Games in our country. All Paralympic Games are a catalyst for social change. It helps to put the pressure on governments to make things accessible for people with disabilities because every country could do better. I’m looking forward to working with LA28 to hopefully make some big changes happen.”