

# Up For the Challenge: Danelle Umstead is Ready to Get Back on the Snow

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When Team Toyota athlete [Danelle Umstead](#) was 29 years old, her father called to ask if she wanted to go skiing. Umstead, who had never skied before and had recently lost most of her vision to a degenerative eye disorder, agreed to at least try it out. Now, the alpine skier is a three-time Paralympian.

“I felt desperate,” Umstead says. “That’s what led me to go ski with him. Those first turns changed my life and gave me a reason. I always say that I was born again, and through sport, I learned how to live with my disability, move with my disability, and see with my disability.”

Umstead grew up in Plano, Texas and while she was an athlete, she had little to no interest in winter sports. At age 13, she started to lose her sight to retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease that progressively causes vision loss. Umstead’s blindness is in her central and peripheral vision, so over the years she’s lost the ability to see any details and can only see general shapes, if the lighting is right.

“I had to give up my driver’s license and all these things,” she says. “I was pretty depressed and feeling sorry for myself. I also had just lost my mom and all my usable vision. It was just a really low point in my life.”

That's when Umstead's dad told her about the program at Angel Fire, a resort near where he lived in northern New Mexico, that catered to blind skiers. Learning how to ski as an adult is generally considered to be more difficult than learning as a child, so Umstead found the movements to feel a little unnatural. Plus, she had to put her complete trust in a guide to get her down the mountain safely. Despite the challenges, she loved the sport immediately and ultimately moved to New Mexico to be closer to the mountains.

"I loved it, but it was tough," she says. "Going down the mountain, fast, with basically your eyes closed, trusting someone to guide you? Yes, all of that was absolutely difficult. But it felt like a challenge, and I had to prove to myself that I was able to do it."

Four years later, Umstead met her husband Rob, a collegiate skier who became her guide. The two became the first husband and wife duo to represent Team USA in Paralympic Alpine Skiing and went on to compete in three Paralympic Games in 2010, 2014 and 2018, bringing home a combined three bronze medals. Today, they're hoping to take that Paralympic experience to Beijing 2022.



### **Team Vision4Gold**

In visually impaired skiing, the skier follows a guide through the course, listening for vocal instructions about what to look out for and when to turn. The guide-skier relationship relies on trust, which Umstead says is not inherent. Over the years, the pair has learned how to communicate through a lot of trial and error.

"The trust is not automatic," she says. "I know when turns are about to end because the tone of his voice starts changing, but that's because of the practice we've done over the years, not because we're husband and wife. It's something you have to work hard on."

Despite the hard work, Umstead says she wouldn't have it any other way. She and her husband train together and push one another to be the best team they can be. When the Umstead's started competing together in 2008, they called themselves Team Vision4Gold. They were not on the national team, looking for sponsors, and wanted to use their story to inspire people that anything is possible.

"We wanted to show people that our vision was to get gold at the Paralympic Games," she says. "We wanted to share our journey along the way and show people that anything is possible, our vision for gold."

Over the years, Umstead says that Vision4Gold has become an outlet for people with disabilities and a place they can find information and resources. The Paralympian prioritizes giving back and started a nonprofit, Sisters in Sports Foundation, to help women and girls get involved in athletics. She also hopes to start a Vision4Gold grant to help women with disabilities compete. According to Umstead, there's not enough support for women in sports in general, but when it comes to women with disabilities specifically, there are more barriers.

"I want to help women and girls with visual disabilities secure guide funding," she says. "It's twice as expensive for visually impaired athletes to ski because they have to pay for their guide. Giving back has always been my thing, and I want Vision4Gold to carry the legacy of our journey and help others through theirs."

### **Tackling Yet Another Challenge**

In October 2010, a few months after the Vancouver 2010 Paralympic Winter Games, Umstead woke up and could not move her entire right side from her ribcage down to her toes. She was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), a long-lasting nerve disease that affects the brain and spinal cord and can cause problems with balance, muscle control, and other body functions.

"I had to learn how to walk again," she says. "I had to learn how to run again, ski again. The feeling of your brain not connecting to your body is really scary — an unsteady, unsure thing."

Because Umstead has been blind for most of her life, she's comfortable with her disability and what she calls her "blind girl problems." With her MS, she finds herself feeling more vulnerable. Each day can be different from the next, so when she wakes up, she doesn't always know if she's going to be able get up and walk or remember someone's name.



“Yes, it does affect my training some days, my skiing, my workouts, and sometimes my everyday communication,” she says. “But that can’t keep you from waking up in the morning. Every day I go out there and do my best for the day. Sometimes that’s not the fastest race, but I went out there and skied my best.”

When she was first diagnosed with MS, the Paralympian couldn’t help but worry about how she was going to continue racing. All the athletes she competes against have visual disabilities, but she’s blind and has physical challenges. Umstead quickly readjusted her mindset and decided to prove to herself that she could do it.

“It’s that challenge and drive in my heart that I’m not going to let this MS define me. I’m going to define my life with MS,” she says. “Sometimes I’m really, really hard on myself. But with the support of friends, family, and sponsors that truly have been by my side from the beginning, that’s what makes me want to show myself that anything is possible, no matter what stands in your way.”

### **An All-New Games**

Despite Team Vision4Gold’s years of Paralympic experience, Umstead believes when it comes to the Games, she never quite knows what to expect. Every competition is so different, especially with outdoor sports like para alpine skiing. One thing that she’s seen really change over the years is how much support is available for Paralympic athletes.

“In 2010, the Paralympics were very different,” she says. “There was very little media, very little support, very few sponsors. You were just out there with your family and friends. Every Games has gotten better and it’s been beautiful to see that growth in the Paralympic Movement.”

Despite all of the change, one thing has remained constant for Umstead over the years: her pride in being a Paralympian.

“Going into the Games, you have a feeling of accomplishment, a feeling of honor and pride to wear that uniform and celebrate your country and what you’ve done,” she says. “And that doesn’t change no matter how many Games you compete in.”

Early in 2020, the athlete broke her leg in a crash during Canadian nationals and needed three surgeries. That rehab time, plus the impact of COVID-19, meant a lot of time off snow. Now that she is fully healed, Umstead is excited and ready to start competing again.

“This Games, with all the things that have gotten in the way, COVID, me breaking my leg, my MS taking me out for a season, I just want to go in there with no expectations but do our personal best,” she says. “Rob and I have always known we have to work twice as hard to ski our best, so we’re just ready to get on snow and get after it.”