Amy Purdy Shares Her Love for Snowboarding by Giving Back

March 03, 2022

After Team Toyota athlete Amy Purdy lost both of her legs to meningitis when she was 19 years old, her doctors weren't sure if she would ever walk without a walker again. But the young snowboarder didn't like being told "no," and seven months after getting fitted for prosthetics, she was not only walking — she was snowboarding again.

"I never wanted my legs to be a burden," Purdy says. "I wanted them to be something that I got creative with and could incorporate into my life. My passion for snowboarding and pushing myself led me to want to find out what could be possible for me."

Originally from Las Vegas, Purdy grew up skiing with her family in Utah at a small resort outside of town before switching to snowboarding when she was 15 years old. At 19, Purdy developed an infection called meningococcal meningitis and was given a less than 2% chance of survival. She lost both of her kidneys and her legs below the knee but recovered after receiving a kidney transplant from her father.

Purdy continued to snowboard recreationally and met her husband, Daniel, another avid snowboarder, in Crested Butte, Colorado. Together, in 2005, the two founded Adaptive Action Sports -— an organization that

helps create opportunities for individuals with disabilities to get involved in skateboarding, snowboarding and other action sports -— and devoted themselves to getting adaptive snowboarding into the Paralympic Winter Games Sochi 2014.

Purdy went on to compete in two Paralympic Winter Games, Sochi 2014 and PyeongChang 2018, winning a total of three medals. While Purdy is currently rehabbing an injury and will not compete in Beijing 2022, the Paralympic icon is just as involved in the Paralympic Movement as ever, focusing on growing the sport and getting as many athletes on snowboards as she can.

“I miss training for the Paralympics,” she says. “Physically I miss that so much. While I believe I’ll get back to it, I also feel that stepping away has allowed me to develop other interests in other parts of my life and get back to snowboarding for the reasons I started the sport in the first place.”

A New Way Down the Mountain

When Purdy was first ready to get back on snow after her illness, her doctor recommended that she take off her prosthetics and try mono-skiing. But while she didn’t know any other amputee snowboarders, she was determined to make adaptive snowboarding as close to the real thing as possible.

“I just wanted to be able to snowboard again,” she says. “But when I first tried, my feet didn’t work the way that I needed them to; -my ankles didn’t bend. In general, you want your setup to be fairly stiff because it makes your snowboard responsive. But having two prosthetic legs, it makes you so stiff that you have zero ankle motion at all and the board’s too responsive.”

Purdy learned to ride again on what she called her “Frankenstein feet,” which were made up of feet from one set of prosthetics and ankles from another, complete with a bunch of pink duct tape and wood shoved under her heels.

“It was frustrating and motivating at the same time because I knew what snowboarding was supposed to feel like, but my body couldn’t do it,” Purdy says. “It just shows how determined I was to make it work. Adaptive athletes haven’t been able to rely on anyone else to do this for us, so we really had to figure it out ourselves.”

Amy now snowboards on a more modern snowboard specific foot, one that most adaptive snowboarders today use, which has a shock in the ankle and can change the pressure and ankle motion — a design that has helped elevate the sport to where it is today.

“Snowboarding wouldn’t be at the high level it is today without that foot because it’s given us the mobility needed to race at the highest level,” she says. “If you look at the first Paralympic Games that included para snowboarding, Sochi, compared to what Beijing is going to look like and the physical ability and movement, it’s significantly different. And that’s definitely because of the advancement of prosthetics.”

As the sport grows, Purdy says that the level of athleticism gets higher and higher every year, making it an incredibly exciting sport to watch. She hopes that with the right media attention and brand support, the rest of the world will start to see that, too.

The Importance of the Nonprofits

While Purdy and her husband first started Adaptive Action Sports with recreational snowboarding in mind, they quickly realized how incredible the athletes were and that they deserved the chance to show off their talents on the world stage.

“We started to push each other,” she says. “I saw what these other snowboarders were doing on prosthetics, and, collectively, we decided there were enough of us and we wanted to get snowboarding in the Paralympic Games.”

Snowboarding has been an Olympic sport since 1998, but for its adaptive counterpart — para snowboarding (formerly called adaptive snowboarding) — to get into the Paralympics, eight countries would have to participate. Determined, Purdy said she would raise all the money she could and travel worldwide to compete, often participating as one of the only women who would show up to compete. Adaptive Action Sports also helped put together the first world championships for para snowboarding, and in 2011, they got the word it would be part of the Paralympic Winter Games in 2014. That's when Purdy started training full time alongside other athletes at Adaptive Action Sports to try make the first Paralympic snowboard team.

"Since then, it's just exploded," she says. "In 2014, we knew every single athlete who competed because we were all part of this push together. Now, every World Cup or event you show up to, there are tons of athletes that we've never met before, coming from all parts of the world. We always knew that once it became a true Paralympic sport, it would take on a life of its own. It's out of our hands now and has grown so significantly — just the number of athletes, it's incredible."

Like many adaptive sports, para snowboarding requires high-tech equipment. Add in the costs of travel and required qualifying competitions, and training for the Paralympics becomes an expensive endeavor. That's why so many adaptive sports rely on nonprofits like Adaptive Action Sports.

"It begins with the grassroots, nonprofit organizations," she says. "There's a training program or organization behind every Paralympic sport that's doing the outreach, getting people involved and training the athletes to the level they need to be at in order to make Team USA."

While Purdy hopes to keep using Adaptive Action Sports to boost the Paralympic pipeline, especially with female athletes, she is also focused on returning the organization to its recreational roots.

"We started the organization with recreation in mind," she says. "We love snowboarding and want to help other people who have disabilities get the resources they need. We're planning to continue training these high-level athletes, but we also love being able to just share the love of the sport and get people up on boards."