Chasing Dreams: Team Toyota Gears Up for the 2022 Paralympic Winter Games

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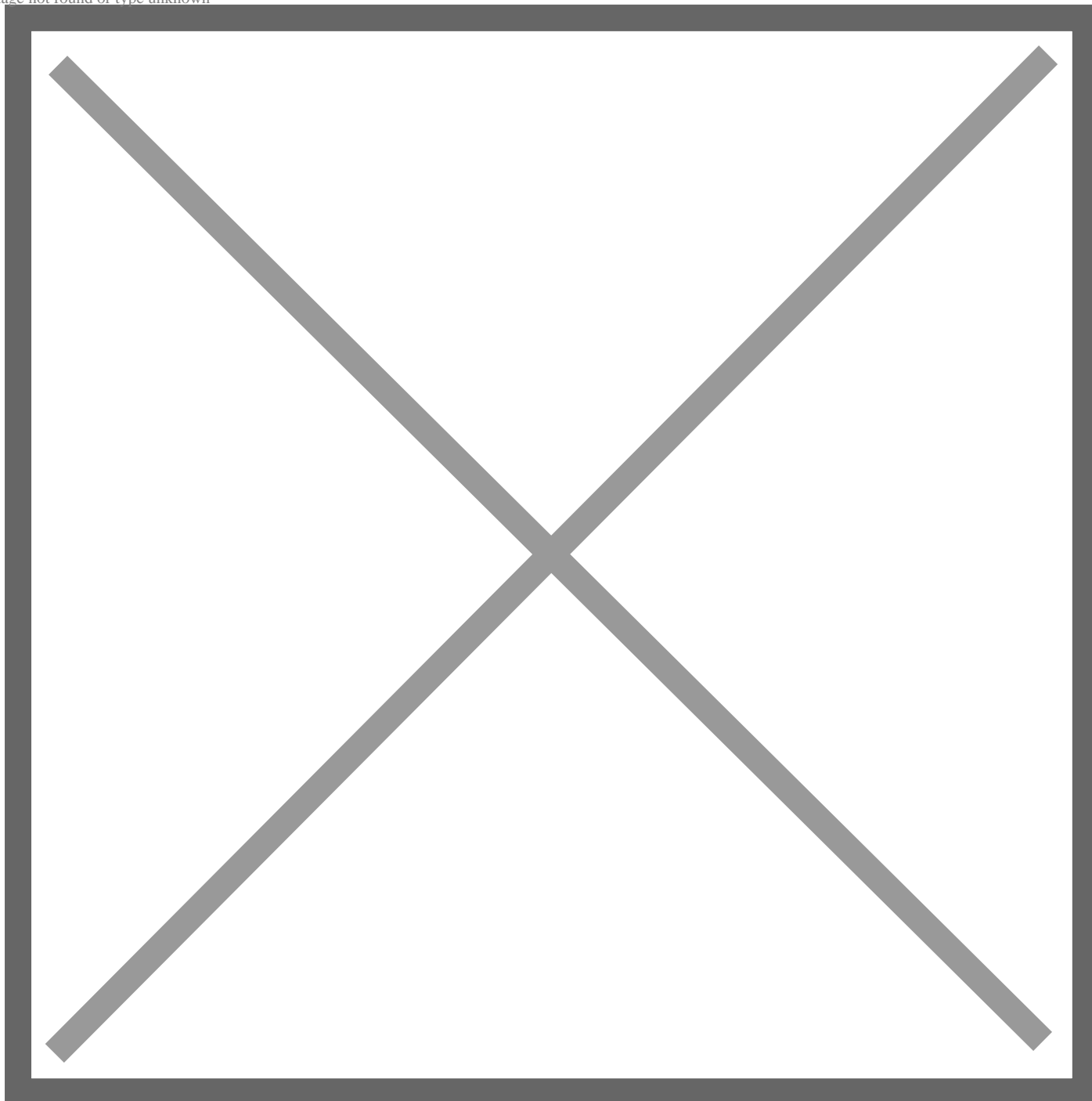
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As the sports world shifts focus to the Paralympic Winter Games – five athletes on the U.S. Team Toyota roster will be chasing their dreams for a chance to bring home the gold. They'll be competing in sports ranging from sled hockey to para alpine skiing and biathlon. Let's get to know the athletes who will be proudly representing Team USA and Team Toyota.

Meet the Paralympic Athletes

Andrew Kurka (Para Alpine Skiing)

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As a young boy, Andrew Kurka dreamed of wrestling in the Olympics. In pursuit of that goal, Kurka won the Alaska state championships in freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling an impressive six times. But at the age of 13, an ATV accident changed his life forever when it damaged his spinal cord, leaving him partially paralyzed from the waist down.

It wasn't until his physical therapist — with a program called Challenge Alaska — encouraged Kurka to try mono-skiing that he caught another glimpse of how he might compete on the biggest international stage. In 2010, just three years after taking to the monoski for the first time, Kurka made the U.S. Paralympic National Team and went on to become the first person to monoski the Christmas Chute on the North Face of Mt. Alyeska in Girdwood, Alaska.

Appearing in his third Paralympic Games this year, Kurka is no stranger to the podium. At PyeongChang in 2018, Kurka won a gold medal in downhill and a silver medal in super-G — successes he hopes to replicate, or best, this year.

Quotes: "I just want to be a little better than I was before. 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."

You can learn more about Andrew Kurka by exploring his athlete biography page, here.

Oksana Masters (Cross-Country Skiing and Biathlon)

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. Her athletic career began when she was 13 and took up rowing. 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 having the ability to control it — gave her the freedom of movement. In the Paralympic Games London 2012, Masters won bronze for that very sport, specifically in trunk and arms mixed double sculls — the first-ever U.S. medal in that event.

Inclusive of summer and winter, Beijing 2022 will be Masters' sixth consecutive Games, with the 10-time Paralympic medalist having won a medal in all four of her sports – rowing, cross-country skiing, biathlon and cycling. The Louisville, Kentucky native is the most decorated athlete on the 2022 U.S. Paralympic Team roster with four golds and having earned seven Paralympic medals in Nordic skiing.

Quotes: "My mind is just go, go, go. 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."

You can learn more about Oksana Masters by exploring her athlete biography page, here.

Rico Roman (Sled Hockey)

In February of 2007, on his third tour in Iraq, U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Rico Roman was wounded by an improvised explosive device. As a result, his left leg was amputated above the knee. But just a year later, Operation Comfort, a San Antonio-based organization that assists injured U.S. service personnel, introduced Roman, a Purple Heart recipient, to sled hockey.

It immediately became his passion and, in 2009, Roman joined his first major league sled hockey team. In 2011, he made his debut on the U.S. National Sled Hockey Team and, by 2014, had secured a spot on the Paralympic team for that year's Games where he lit the cauldron during the Opening Ceremony.

As the Team USA Sled Hockey assistant captain, Roman will be appearing in his third consecutive Paralympic Winter Games as he and the team look to defend their two previous gold medals and aim for a three-peat.

At age 41, the Portland, Oregon, native will be the oldest player on the U.S. team and as a two-time Paralympic and three-time world champion, a Purple Heart recipient, and a father of two, Roman has been a model of consistency for his fellow teammates over the last decade.

Quotes: "Finding the sport really gave me an outlet. I didn't think about my injury when I was out on the ice. And I still don't. I really feel just, like, free in the moment, enjoying the sport and spending time with my teammates."

You can learn more about Rico Roman by exploring his athlete biography page, [here](#).

Evan Strong (Snowboarding)

Growing up in Hawaii, Evan Strong fell in love with skateboarding and landed his first sponsorship by the time he was 13. But just over a week from his 18th birthday, Strong was injured in a motorcycle accident when he was struck by a drunk driver in a head-on collision. The injury led to the amputation of his left leg below the knee.

A few years later, Strong moved to California with the goal of regaining his mobility and learning how to snowboard. By 2012, Strong was competing in adaptive snowboarding world championships, taking home his first gold in snowboardcross that year. It was a feat he would replicate to become the first man to win a gold

medal in snowboarding at the Paralympic Winter Games 2014 in Sochi — the sport's first year in the competition.

Competing in his third Paralympic Winter Games this year, Strong has trained hard in hopes of making it to the podium again.

Quotes: "I am so appreciative that I have been able to travel the world and compete at the highest level. The culmination is ending up at the Paralympic Games and representing Team USA. We have opened up people's minds to what elite adaptive athletes are capable of and I hope to see it grow and grow."

You can learn more about Evan Strong by exploring his athlete biography page, here.

Danelle Umstead (Para Alpine Skiing)

When she was just 13, Danelle Umstead was diagnosed with a genetic eye condition that results in total blindness. Later, at 29 years old, she experienced skiing for the first time and discovered her passion. A few years later, Umstead met her husband, Rob, and with him as her eventual full-time guide, they were the first husband and wife duo to represent Team USA in Paralympic Alpine Skiing, winning three bronze medals in three Paralympic Winter Games appearances.

Umstead suffered another setback in 2010 when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, which paralyzed half her body and left her to relearn how to walk. But true to her challenger spirit, she would battle back onto her feet and compete in the Paralympic Winter Games (in 2014 and 2018) and Alpine Ski World Championships, where

she won her 53rd World Cup podium placement in 2020.

One of the most decorated visually impaired alpine skiers in U.S. history, Umstead is also a role model for young female athletes with disabilities through her Sisters in Sports Foundation. Umstead and her husband are the only married couple on Team USA and are set to compete in their fourth consecutive Paralympic Winter Games together.

Quotes: "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. And that doesn't change no matter how many Games you compete in."

You can learn more about Danelle Umstead by exploring her athlete biography page, here.

For all news related to the Winter Games, click here. For up-to-date athlete news, follow #TeamToyota on Instagram (@TeamToyota).