

Toronto Paralympian heading to Vancouver

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Thursday, 11 March 2010



TORONTO — For some athletes, Vancouver 2010 is just getting started. This week, Canada hosts its historic first-ever Paralympic games, with more than 1,300 athletes from 44 countries.

Para-alpine skier Melanie Schwartz to compete in Vancouver Paralympic games.

Among the 60 members of Team Canada is newcomer Melanie Schwartz, a 24-year-old para-alpine skier.



Reaching the Olympic level has been almost as much of a surprise to the Torontonians Schwartz as it has to the people around her. Born missing half of her right leg, she tried many sports as a child, but says with a sense of wonderment that she was never particularly athletic until she was almost finished university. “Skiing wasn’t anything special.”

Part of the problem was that she was trying to ski like everybody else around her – on two legs.

“Originally when I started skiing, I skied on two skis and two poles and used my prosthetic leg.”

She wears the prosthetic leg for most activities, and while she’s very skilled, the prosthetic was far from a natural on the slopes. “I didn’t have enough control of the second ski.”

After she had been trying for about five years – driven by her love of the sport’s speed – an instructor with Ontario Track 3 Ski Association, which teaches children and youth with disabilities, convinced her to try skiing on one leg. It took awhile to gain the skill she needed, but Schwartz quickly realized that this was her best shot at getting beyond the beginner level.

Special poles equipped with outriggers – essentially, short skis – help para-alpine skiers like Schwartz maintain

essential balance without sacrificing speed and adeptness on the hills.

Though she enjoyed the sport enough to join the ski team as a student at Forest Hill Collegiate Institute, Schwartz wasn't serious about competing until her first disabled race three years ago in January 2007, when she was a computer science student at the University of Waterloo.

"I figured I'll just try it for one year," she says. "Then I showed up at the Ontario championships and won two golds. I was absolutely shocked."

The terms used for competitions can vary: disabled, adaptive, para-alpine. But what is certain is that the races are as fast and challenging as those in non-disabled skiing, though, as in the Paralympic Games, scores are sometimes equalized to create a level playing field between skiers with different disabilities.

Several key wins led Schwartz to the World Cup of para-alpine skiing in Italy this January, and there, she qualified to represent Canada at the 2010 Paralympic Games. Even before qualifying in December, she was also chosen to carry the Olympic torch at Blue Mountain resort, near Collingwood.

Between March 13 and 20, she plans to compete in three out of five Paralympic events: slalom, giant slalom and super-G – a cross between slalom and downhill that gives athletes only a single chance to complete a faster run than other slalom events, with up to 30 tricky direction changes. Paralympic skiers compete on the same courses as Olympic women's teams.

"It's thrilling to watch," says Schwartz's father, Jay, who, along with other family members and friends, will be cheering on his daughter in person in British Columbia. He'd be "thrilled to death" to see his daughter place in the top 10 this year, but, "as long as she doesn't hurt herself, I'm happy."

Realistically, Schwartz is excited just to be competing this year. Her goal isn't the podium – yet. "I'm not in the top 10... I know that there are a lot of people better than me."

But her coach believes she has a shot at a medal in the next games, and that's what Schwartz has set her sights on. "Everything I can do this year is working toward 2014."

When she's not skiing, Schwartz enjoys giving back to organizations that helped her get her start, like the War Amps CHAMP program for child amputees. She's also taught skiing to disabled kids: she started working as an instructor with Ontario Track 3 as soon as she turned 17. She's sorry that she hasn't been able to teach in the past few years because she's competing most of the winter.

Though competition has meant putting her computer career largely on hold to train and compete all winter, she's found some balance by continuing the basic pattern that began with a co-op program in university. It alternated four months of study with four months of work. Now, her schedule is more like "ski in the winter, work in the summer."

"I am my own biggest motivation," Schwartz says. "What drives me most now is challenging myself to become better. I can look back and see that I've improved a lot, or look forward and see how much more there is to learn... and when you do get it, the feeling is fantastic."

You can watch ongoing coverage of para-alpine and other 2010 Paralympic events, including video interviews with Schwartz and other athletes, at <http://www.ctvolympics.ca/paralympics>, <http://www.youtube.com/paralympicsporttv> or <http://www.paralympicsport.tv>.

