

Forest Hill grad competes in Paralympics this week

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There are a lot of unknowns for Melanie Schwartz right now.

Schwartz is in Vancouver this week competing in her first Paralympics in the Alpine Skiing (standing) discipline, after just one year on the World Cup circuit.

So, for those that are surprised the 24-year-old, third-year development team member is on the world's grandest stage for paralympic athletes, you're not alone.

"I had never meant to take it seriously," she said over the phone from Whistler on March 13 about the sport. "I started racing under the assumption that I'd be doing it for one year and I would go back to being a ski instructor."

To illustrate the point further, Schwartz, a Forest Hill Collegiate graduate who grew up in the Bathurst Street and Eglinton Avenue area, makes light of a discussion she had a year ago with a ski instructor on her future in the sport.

"He asked if I was going to try to make it to 2010 (Olympics) and I was like, 'ha-ha, very funny... Don't be ridiculous,'" she said. "It never crossed my mind that I could actually be competitive in the sport... I'm still on the development team, I'm not at the top of the team. But here I am."

That's how much these Games were a non-reality for the University of Waterloo computer science graduate a few short months ago.

Even when she was chosen by Alpine Canada to carry the Paralympic torch during a Blue Mountain ceremony on Dec. 29 she had no idea she would follow in its path a couple of short months later - she wouldn't qualify until the end of January for the Paralympics during a World Cup event in Italy, after all.

"I guess because I'm so new to the sport I'm still growing. I haven't really found my niche yet," she said, when asked which of the three events - the Slalom, GS or Super GS - are her strongest and expected the best results from.

"I'm still figuring those things out, my skiing still changes from day to day so we'll see what happens... as long as I'm changing for the better."

Schwartz, who was born with a femur deficiency - a condition called Proximal Femoral Focal Deficiency that affects the pelvis, particularly the hip bone, and the proximal femur - began skiing at age nine, using a prosthetic leg up to the hip, two skis and two poles.

She didn't have a great deal of success on two skis.

"So I tried skiing on one leg and I found it much easier," she said.



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She also uses "outriggers" for ski poles, which are kind of like crutches with short skis on the end of them. The change in equipment made a world of difference for the self-proclaimed speed demon.

"It made skiing a lot easier, but it made the off-hill stuff, like walking and carrying your skis at the same time more difficult, so on the hill I gained a sense of freedom. But off it I lost a bit. But in the end it was worth it... I would not be where I am right now racing on two skis."

Schwartz, a ski instructor with the Etobicoke-based Ontario Track Ski 3 Association, finished in second place at the national championships a year ago, started her 2010 Olympic campaign Sunday with preliminary Super G races.

The Giant Slalom and Slalom are scheduled for Thursday, March 18 and Saturday, March 20 respectively.

"I try not to look at the big picture too much and, yes I've come a long way in the time I've been training, but I have a long way to go and so much more I want to do," she said, admitting she's "more numb than nervous" at competing with the world's best this week.

"There are a lot of unknowns, but I'll be happy with a top-10 (finish)."

After the Paralympics she will participate in the 2010 Telus Canadian Para-Alpine ski national championships from March 25 to 28 at Mt. Washington on Vancouver Island.

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