

The Secrets of Successful Men

CHAPTER SIX

My Life as a Para Sport Athlete

By: Kyle N. Scott

Being a person with Cerebral Palsy (CP) or living with a life-changing condition can have long-lasting consequences and leave you with scars that may never fade. In this case, being unable to play sports in a school or extracurricular sports team made it extremely difficult for me to sit on the sidelines and watch my age group enjoy themselves.

The quarterly check-ups revealed nothing of significance following a traumatic birth. The examining physicians said I seemed fine until sixteen months after birth when we were sent to the spasticity clinic, where I was diagnosed with CP. The journey began from then on with my parents seeing a multitude of doctors and a plethora of therapists who told them I might never walk or talk normally or that I would have major coordination issues. I could do nearly everything and beyond with hard work and practice. Despite having articulation issues, I began to speak when most infants do. Considering I had difficulty with pronunciation, I was determined to be understood. With my type of CP, I have Athetoid, speaking, walking and balancing was an ongoing task throughout the years of my life.

At age two, I attended a special program offered by the Children's Developmental Rehabilitation Program (CDRP) for kids with disabilities. This program was highly successful in building our self-confidence and also helping us form the best physical well-being we could achieve. We were given the tools to develop our cognitive skills and create a structure to embrace our literacy abilities. I was very fortunate enough to have been born in the late eighties when the community began athletic opportunities for those living with disabilities.

I was four years old when I started playing with the Hamilton Challenger Baseball Association and six years old when I started playing with the Hamilton District Sledge Hockey Association. When I began playing Challenger Baseball, I was still unable to walk on my own and had to rely on others to help me.

My dad and uncle shared duties on the field with me when it was my turn to hit the ball off the tee ball, run the bases, and throw it. They would place their hands underneath my armpit.

Gratefully, at the age of five, I attended the Moira Institute Program delivered by therapists who were originally from Hungary, for three weeks, which taught me how to strategize a pattern to reach a pace and also a centre of balance where I learned to walk independently. The therapists drilled these exercises into my mind through repetition, called the "One, Two, Three Step."

Shortly after, I started playing independently and competitively until the age of fourteen, when I found out that I had hip dysplasia (having a hip joint that would often dislocate due to the deterioration of the hip and the ball joint). My ability to walk was affected by the pain, and I was forced to retire from Challenger Baseball. Have I had the option of continuing to play? Definitely, with my wheelchair, but there was no way I would play in a wheelchair since I am too competitive, and it wouldn't be the same as running the bases independently.

As a Challenger baseball player for ten years, I have enjoyed every moment and have been honoured to represent the all-star team a few times. During this time, it has been one of the most devastating times of my life because I have lost my independence in walking, which I have worked so hard for over the years.

The sport of Sledge Hockey immediately captured my attention since hockey is my favourite sport. The lack of a strong upper torso prevented me from pushing myself on the ice using one arm to shoot and pass the puck. In those cases where players cannot make it themselves, a pusher is required. With a pusher, I can play the game and create incredible plays with one arm when it requires two hands to push yourself.

Sledge Hockey remained my passion even after I suffered severe hip pain for a decade. Although there was intense pain after getting hit by the sled and spending so much time on the ice, it only took a few days for my hip to heal partially, just in time to go back on the ice. It wasn't until the pain became unbearable that I abandoned my passion for the game. I was fortunate enough to play sledge hockey for fifteen years. From creating incredible plays, scoring goals and being in the penalty box, I truly enjoyed every second of it.

As a child, I had an extreme passion for playing sports, and that was my biggest obstacle. In my heart, I knew that I would have contributed all of my passion, sportsmanship, and leadership, no matter what age I was. Although I wasn't on the team physically, I was there in spirit, cheering on my brother, friends, and the next generation of friends' and families' children. As a disabled person, I was not going to feel sorry for myself because I could not physically play an "able-bodied" sport. My passion for sports is something I would like to share with others and cheer them on from the stands. I even went to my high school girls' basketball, hockey and volleyball games, of course - I WAS NOT STUPID!

Following ten years of retirement from sports due to hip dysplasia, I settled into a deep depression until I had the chance to reconnect with the President of Challenger Baseball after publishing my memoir and found out that their winter programs had Boccia on the slideshow. On the first night of the winter program, I began playing Boccia under the instruction of Kim, who has been a member of Boccia Canada for many years.

Kim mentioned that Boccia is a Paralympic sport, and as soon as I heard that, I rekindled my desire to be a Paralympian once again! On the first night, Kim noticed how keen I was and asked if I had played before. My only experience with this sport was playing Bocce with my family during that summer and with my Italian grandparents as a child. I have always been competitive and played a few other sports before retiring due to hip dysplasia. As Boccia entered my life, I began setting goals. After a few weeks of playing, Kim was quite surprised at how well I was playing and said, "If you keep practicing and decide to go further with Boccia, you will achieve great success!"

Kim pointed me toward our provincial association, the Ontario Cerebral Palsy Sports Association (OCPSA) when I discovered it was a competitive sport provincially, nationally and internationally.

Following eight months of recreational Boccia, I decided to compete without a doubt in my first regional qualifying event of May 2022. Upon entering the recreation centre where the event was being held, my parents and I knew nobody, and it was a different environment than recreational Boccia. The players are highly competitive and have more skills.

My opponents were a veteran and a Paralympic athlete. Of course, the morning of my first competitive match was filled with pounding heartbeats, racing thoughts, and nerves. Despite my inexperience with competitive Boccia, I qualified for the Ontario Boccia Championships (OBC) by finishing third in my first regional qualifying round. Ed, the head coach of Team Ontario until mid-2023 and the current BC1/BC2 coach for the Paralympics of Boccia Canada, was impressed by my potential. The improvement I made after just one game was impressive. As a newcomer to Boccia, I felt honoured to be recognized at first sight.

Each athlete must be classified to find out what category I fall into, BC1-BC5 in Canada and up to BC4 internationally. The classification process is a continuous process by which athletes are assessed to determine whether their physical impairments affect their performance and to ensure that all athletes are treated fairly. The classification system provides structure to competition at the club, state, national, regional, and international levels.

At the OBC, I was classified as a BC1 athlete by the physiotherapist and technical specialist from the OCPA. They believe I have the potential and drive to compete at the National, International and Paralympic levels if I continue to train and improve my skills. You will meet and play against Lance, a Paralympian returning in 2017 after a long hiatus from competing at the Paralympic Games in Sydney, Australia, in 2000. You will succeed when you connect with him!" After a two-day event, I won silver playing against Lance. As a gesture of congratulations, I wheeled up to Lance.

Hearing from a Paralympian that I played well and improved from our first match was so satisfying. I was reminded to keep at this sport because I have a lot of potential. In no time, I will become one of the best candidates! Lance quoted.

Ed mentioned that there are numerous competitions if you want to complete competitiveness. My mind began to wander; I travelled for Sledge Hockey games only a few times a season and maybe two local tournaments, so how much more could it be?

The duration of Boccia competitions can range from two days to two weeks, especially if you're competing at a competitive level such as Provincials, Nationals,

Internationals, and Paralympics.

I was strongly encouraged to attend their Annual Nationally Sanctioned Boccia Blast the following month. In this competition, I had the privilege of playing against the top athletes and Paralympians from coast to coast in Canada. It was a pleasant surprise to place fifth at my first Boccia Blast. Within a week, I was asked if I wanted to participate in the provincial team that year. It was a no-brainer for me to join the team.

That would enable me to learn so much from the top players across Canada. It is an honour for me to have my skillsets and passion for Boccia catch the attention of provincial coaches and staff within six months of taking up the sport.

The 2022 National Canadian Boccia Championships were held in our province, London, Ontario. There are individual, team and pair competitions and a banquet during the week-long event. A certain amount of players can be selected from each category by each province — a maximum of three from BC1-BC5. Additionally, each province can submit a list of wildcards for national competition. Technical Delegates (TD) must approve the wildcards.

My first Canadian Nationals was an exceptional experience; the cheers and laughter of the athletes, referees, volunteers, and spectators filled the atmosphere, even when this sport was extremely competitive. As a result of my individual performance, I placed fourth out of seven participants and won gold in the BC1/2 team competition! Considering this was my first appearance with Team Ontario, it's not bad at all!

Our achievement of winning gold in our home province was particularly meaningful to us.

Late in 2022, my Program Manager, Jules, emailed me to inform me that I'd qualified for the 2023 Ontario Parasport Games! It was an extremely exciting moment because I have always dreamed of becoming a Para Athlete in Sledge Hockey and Challenger Baseball. Regardless, joining Boccia has kept me optimistic since I'm living in the present, and even better, I was featured on the cover.

The Ontario Parasport Games were first delivered in 1975 by the City of Cambridge. This program delivers and supports multi-sport events, including the Ontario Summer and Winter Games for youth, the Ontario 55+ Winter and

Summer Games and the Ontario Parasport Games. The Ontario Parasport Games are like mini Olympics and Paralympics, including everything from the opening ceremony to closing medal ceremonies, and my first performance as a Para Athlete earned me a silver medal.

Two months later, I entered another competition to build my skills and become a better Boccia player called Défi Sportif AlterGo. The first Défi Sportif opened on April 19, 1984, and is a multi-sport event for disabled athletes. The Défi Sportif is unique in that it involves athletes of the five types of disabilities: auditory, physical, psychiatric, intellectual, and visual, as well as athletes of all levels, from students to up-and-coming athletes and Paralympic athletes from different countries participate.

The Défi Sportif is held every year in Montreal, Canada. It was a true honour and pleasure to perform in the historic Aréna Maurice-Richard building next to the Olympic Stadium that had the 1976 Summer Olympics. My most impressive individual result is winning silver after eleven months of competing at a competitive level! I now feel I belong alongside the top athletes; they know who I am now, and I am one to beat!

During that late summer, I participated in Boccia Blast for the second time. As a result of countless hours spent training and practicing daily, I won my first individual gold, defeating one of Canada's top athletes and once a Paralympian.

After winning the gold, I received an email from the Executive Director of OCPSA (Ontario Cerebral Palsy Sports Association) stating that I was selected to represent Ontario at the Canadian Boccia Championships in Richmond, BC. This marks the second consecutive year I earned a spot on the provincial team. I feel very honoured to be recognized for my skillsets, considering I have only recently started competing in this sport in Spring 2022.

The 2023 Canadian Boccia Championship was held at the Richmond Olympic Oval, where the Winter Olympic Games were held in Vancouver in 2010. In a million years, I would have never imagined playing where many Olympic and Paralympic athletes had performed.

In case you didn't know, the Richmond Olympic Oval is an indoor multi-sports arena in Richmond, British Columbia. It was initially designed as a speed skating rink for the 2010 Winter Olympics. Since then, the venue has been redesigned and now serves as a community multi-sport park and includes two ice hockey rinks, two running tracks, a climbing wall, a rowing tank and a flexible area that can be used for, among other sports, basketball, volleyball, indoor soccer and table tennis, as well as an experience of the Olympic Games from 2010. It was a memorable experience!

Team Ontario won GOLD in the team competition for the second year in a row! It was a wonderful experience and an opportunity to put my skillsets to work to bring home a gold medal for the team. We all contributed to the victory. A total team effort paid off after arduous work!

Throughout childhood, sports were my passion until I was forced to retire due to physical limitations. Despite the heartache, I felt for many years, Boccia has returned to me the piece of myself that was taken away and given me a new appreciation for a sport I would never have identified as my own. Since competing on the national stage, I had the pleasure of meeting Team Canada's coach, César and the High-Performance Director, Mario, for an intriguing conversation. It surprised them both to learn I had only been playing competitively for six months and that I would only improve my skills over time. Each time I compete, I am on Team Canada's radar list, and they keep a close eye on me.

My dream and goal is to join Team Canada to compete internationally and hopefully at the Paralympic Summer Games. If I . . . Wait, when I become a member of Team Canada, it will be a dream come true and a privilege. The sky's the limit . . . Shoot for the stars!

A person living with a disability may not be able to play on an extracurricular team like an able-bodied person. We should be grateful we are living in an era where a great variety of sports have been created for people with disabilities. This has allowed us to participate in sports that we are passionate about and live out our dream sport!