



SWITCHING GEARS AND CYCLING TO THE TOP: KEELY SHAW'S JOURNEY TO A PARALYMPIC MEDAL

Every athlete competing at the Paralympic or Olympic Games takes a unique journey on their way to the top. While talent, great coaching, and years of hard work are elements almost all have in common, the elite athletes who represent our nation at the highest level often need to overcome seemingly impossible barriers to create opportunities for themselves. This is Keely Shaw's story.



Canadian Para cyclist Keely Shaw's journey to earning Canada's first medal at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games is a story of determination, overcoming adversities, and achieving remarkable things.

Growing up in the rural town of Midale, Saskatchewan, with a population of only 500, sport and nature were an important part of Keely's upbringing. Being surrounded by vast farmland and watching her older brothers play hockey, there were two things Keely wanted to be when she grew up: a veterinarian and an Olympic ice hockey player.

"I remember telling my mom at 10 years old that I wanted to go to the Olympics and play hockey. Elite sport was my goal and became my entire focus. Hockey was my first love."

Keely's parents supported her passion, leading them to shuttle her back and forth to a larger town where she could play competitively.

But at age 15, her life changed drastically.

Keely suffered a horse-riding accident, causing a brain injury that placed her in a coma and on life support. When she woke up from her coma, she had lost all function on the left side of her body. Through months of arduous therapy, she managed to regain 70% of her function. But she realized that her dream of playing hockey was no longer possible due to her changed abilities.

"As a 15-year-old, I wasn't handling life well mentally, and was diagnosed with an eating disorder just over a year after I was discharged from rehabilitation. It gave me a sense of control over my life."

Facing an identity crisis and struggling with her mental health, Keely overcame these challenges with the support of her parents and a community of 500 that rallied behind her. She graduated high school as valedictorian and pursued a degree in Kinesiology at the University of Saskatchewan.

During her university studies, Keely was introduced to Para sports and discovered Para cycling. She started self-training on her road bike and participated in her first road race which ignited her love for the sport.

“After my first race, I fell completely in love with the sport. I felt powerful and coordinated. I loved the camaraderie and the sense of home I felt. I was so welcomed. Cycling filled a hole in my heart that had been there since I realized I couldn’t play hockey at the same level anymore.”

Keely's cycling career took off from there. After cold e-mailing contacts from the Canadian Paralympic Committee, she was invited to train for nationals. She qualified for the Para cycling track World Championships in Rio in 2018 and represented Canada at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games where she won a bronze medal.

“It’s been a surreal whirlwind over the past few years, and I feel fortunate. It’s wild that I always wanted to compete in the Winter Olympics, but life had me switch gears, and I competed at the summer Paralympics instead.”

Keely is accomplished both on the track and off. Pursuing her PhD in Kinesiology, her research focuses on helping people living with similar disabilities learn how to optimally manage their conditions. She uses her platform to inspire others (especially kids) and increase the awareness, visibility, and access to adaptive sport – both at an elite level and recreationally.

“People living with disabilities deserve access to recreation like everyone else. If we only get a five percent increase in elite Para sport athletes, but a 20 percent increase in people just engaging in physical activity, I’d call that a win.”

And what advice would Keely give to her younger self?

“Keep your chin up because it gets so much better. If you’re willing look through a window when a door is closed, sometimes you can find something pretty incredible on the other side. Just keep going – even when it’s hard.”

Now a *Team Toyota* athlete, Keely is looking ahead at the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games. Training and competing while she also prepares to defend her thesis. All in a day’s work for the athlete who’s seemingly impossible story... became possible.