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MARISSA PAPACONSTANTINO: MIND OVER MATTER – DEFYING LIMITS AND INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION

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 Marissa Papaconstantinou's story.



Marissa Papaconstantinou's journey to becoming a bronze medallist at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games defied the limits of human potential, showcasing the power of community, mindset, and determination. The 23-year-old Toronto native was born without a right foot, but that didn't stop her from achieving personal and professional success.

Growing up in the Scarborough area of Toronto, Marissa was fortunate to have access to facilities like Variety Village, which offers adaptive sports for children with disabilities. At the age of 11, she was fitted for her first running blade.

"My parents never treated me as someone with a disability. They always told me I could do anything. I was lucky to experience that

positive support at school and within the community. I even competed against able-bodied kids and played competitive soccer."

While Marissa's childhood was largely positive, she vividly recalls a memory from a school track meet. Another athlete implied that she was cheating or had an advantage because of "that thing" (the running blade) on her leg. Despite the hurtful comment, Marissa relied on the overwhelming support and encouragement she received, which outweighed one ignorant remark.

Marissa made the decision to channel all her effort and focus into track. By age 15, she made her first world championship team, and at 16, she made her debut at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games.

But competing at an elite level at such a young age presented its own set of challenges.

"After a few disappointing losses, there was a point where negative self-talk really got the best of me and my mental health. It affected my confidence and the way I felt about track. I'm physically a small person in stature, but I also started to feel small figuratively."

During the pandemic, Marissa made a conscious decision to shift her mindset. Working with her mental performance coaches, she learned to live each day in the present and found new ways to rebuild her confidence.

"I made a promise to myself that, with each adversity that comes my way, I'm going to ride the waves and focus on my small wins. This helped alleviate the pressure of a 'bad' race."

Marissa attributes her new outlook and resilience to Tokyo 2020, where she ran her best race...so far.

Now a graduate in sports broadcasting from Toronto Metropolitan University, she aspires to use her passion for storytelling to amplify the remarkable stories of Para athletes as a future broadcaster.

A vocal advocate for Para sport, Marissa also participates in initiatives that give back to children living with disabilities, aiming to inspire the next generation of Paralympians. This includes being an ambassador for Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital where she first discovered limitless possibility.

And what advice would Marissa give her younger self?

"Make sure you keep having fun and live presently. Time flies and it's important to enjoy the small moments and celebrate the small wins. Don't take that time for granted."

Now a *Team Toyota* athlete, Marissa is dedicated to rigorous training, competing, and using her platform to continue elevating Para sport. As she sets her sights on Paralympic Games Paris 2024, her determination remains unwavering.