

PADDLE

ACA | Canoe - Kayak - SUP - Raft - Rescue, Volume 2, Issue 6, September 2016

2016 Paralympic

Games in Rio

Exclusive Athlete Interviews

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***Instructors of the Month
for August & September***

Upcoming Competitions



2016 RIO PARALYMPICS

September 7-18, 2016

23 sports | 528 events | 21 venues | 176 countries

[The 2016 Paralympics are the 15th Summer Paralympic Games.](#)

Paracanoe is making its debut at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games! Please [tune in](#) and help us cheer on Kelly Allen, Alana Nichols, and Ann Yoshida as they compete on the U.S. Paracanoe Team.

We had the fortune of interviewing these three dedicated and courageous athletes. Read their stories on the following pages, and get ready to be inspired.



KELLY ALLEN



ACA: *When did you start paddling?*

Allen: Growing up the youngest of four in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, my parents did just about anything to keep us active. They bought our first recreational kayaks when I was in elementary school. Most of our weekends were spent on the icy waters of Lake Michigan, exploring and just splashing around. It wasn't until I was fourteen, and introduced to an event called the Extremity Games, that I was exposed to competitive kayaking. The first year I entered, I was the youngest person in the competition, and if my memory serves me correctly, I was the only female in the kayaking event. As I was up against grown men, (most of which were former military) I felt content with not placing in the top three that year. However, that content did not last long.

The next year, I told my father I wanted to take the competition more seriously and he signed me up for a "learn the forward stroke

class" presented by Brent Reese. I took one lesson and won the Extremity Games, both men's and women's categories, for the next seven years. It was there that I was discovered by Ben Kvanli, a former Olympian who represented Guatemala in Slalom kayak in the '96 Games. He saw me race at the Extremity Games and later found me on Facebook and extended an offer to move to Texas and train for the new event being added to the Paralympic Games, sprint kayak.

ACA: *What is your favorite thing about the sport?*

Allen: My favorite thing about kayaking is just how adaptable of an activity it is. While training with Ben in Texas, I helped him with his non-profit Veterans Adventure. Twice a week we would take severely wounded men and women—who were recovering at the Center for the Intrepid at the Brook Army Medical Center—for paddles down the San Marcos

River as a form of therapy. Every individual we ran down the river was just beginning to explore the possibilities with their newly altered body. I absolutely loved being able to see the life come back into these soldiers' eyes when we would send them down a rapid or waterfall. These were humans who obviously thrived on adventure, and to accompany them on the water as they rediscovered that sense of adventure is probably one of the most beautiful things I will ever experience in my life.

I also love how diverse the sport is. We can send soldiers down waterfalls, or we could take them and their families on relaxing paddles down a calm river. Kayaking has had such a positive influence on my life; it has taken me around the world and allowed me to make connections with people in a totally unique way.

ACA: Can you describe what your daily training regimen has been like, in prep for the Paralympics? (daily workouts, nutrition, etc.)

Allen: My life has become very routine since moving to Oklahoma City to train with Shaun Caven at the OKC Boathouse District (also the Olympic/Paralympic Training Site). I train twice a day, six days a week. I currently train with a small group of elite able-bodied paddlers under the coaching of Shaun.

Our mornings start at 7 AM on the water. Shaun creates a different training plan every week so our training varies. It can consist of a variety of exercises, such as a 12 kilometer paddle to work on technique and stamina, or doing a couple 200 meter race practices. Every

day on the water is different. We also have gym sessions every Tuesday and Thursday mornings. A typical gym session can last about three hours. Shaun sends out a different gym routine each week, and then we follow each session with about an hour and a half of cardio (mine usually is spent on a stationary bike). Since core strength is a major part of paddling, we also spend a good portion of our workout focusing on that area.

ACA: Besides your physical training, do you have any other practices that keep you mentally and emotionally fit?

Allen: I think kayaking is the thing that mostly keeps me mentally and emotionally fit. I genuinely love being in my boat. I love to

be out on the water surrounded by nature - the river is my happy place. Nothing brings me more joy or peace than watching a beautiful Oklahoma sunset on the river from my boat (I have many Instagram photos to prove this @oneandonehalf)! Kayaking has become such a huge part of my life, and I am extremely grateful that I get to do it every day. When we have a tough training session, I think my teammates get annoyed at me for always having a huge smile of my face. I always try to remind myself how lucky I am to be living this life. Not many people get to call the river their office! I made a promise to myself a long time ago that the second this stops being fun, I am going to retire. Luckily, I don't see that happening for a very long time!

ACA: Can you tell us a bit more about your journey to the Paralympics as a paracanoe athlete—i.e., What were some of the biggest challenges you faced, and some of the victo-



ries you celebrated, along the way?

Allen: Growing up with a disability, I always had to work twice as hard as my peers to keep up. However, kayaking is one of the first sports that allowed me to be competitive with my siblings, and that was a major milestone in my life. Participating in the Extremity Games was something that also changed my life. It was there that I first was able to compete with other adaptive athletes. In 2010, I was one of ten young athletes from across the U.S. asked to participate in a Young Ambassador program provided by the United States Olympic Committee. They gave us a backstage look at the 2010 Winter Paralympic Games in Vancouver in hopes of inspiring us as young athletes to continue towards our goals of making Team USA.

I have won several National Championships, and placed in the top ten the past five years on the world stage at World Cups and World Championships. I take very much pride in all of my athletic accomplishments in this sport.

However, I think I am most influenced by my work with Adaptive Adventures. I have actually decided to further my involvement with this type of work by getting my Bachelor's degree in Outdoor Recreation and Management Leadership. I plan on bringing the joy of kayaking and other adaptive sports to people with all different abilities across the United States.

ACA: Do you have a favorite saying or quote that inspires you on a day to day basis?

Allen: I have a quote that my father says to me before every race. "Paddle hard. Stay Dry." I have no idea where this came from, it just appeared in a text exchange one day and has been a tradition ever since. To me, I take it as 'give it my all and be smart in the process'. It encourages me to be both physically strong as well as mentally—both things I try to improve on every time I get in my boat.

ACA: What are your main goals for Rio in September? How do you define success at the games?

Allen: My main goal for the games? I think the obvious answer would be to bring back some pretty shiny hardware! However, I am just as happy to even be part of this amazing event. Especially this being the debut year for Paracanoe, I take it as such a high honor to be able to represent the United States of America. I have experienced the Paralympics as a spectator once before and that was such a monumental moment in my life; I honestly cannot even imagine what participating in them is going to feel like! The Olympics/ Paralympics is an event that brings the world together over a common love of sport. I am happy and honored to be part of such a beautiful thing!

ALANA NICHOLS



ACA: *When did you start paddling?*

Nichols: I started paddling K1 in the fall of 2014 after learning how to Waveski (sit down surfing with a kayak paddle).

ACA: *What is your favorite thing about the sport?*

Nichols: I love that I get to check out! My cell phone is on the shore, and it's just me and momma nature hangin out!

ACA: *Can you describe what your daily training regimen has been like, in prep for the Paralympics? (daily workouts, nutrition, etc.)*

Nichols: I'm on the water from 6-7 AM, and then again from 5-7 PM doing weights plus a 30 min paddle; Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday.

Nutritionally, I continue to keep a clean, high

lean protien and vegetable-based diet. I build in increased carbs closer to competition.

ACA: *Besides your physical training, do you have any other practices that keep you mentally and emotionally fit?*

Nichols: I keep a steady group of girlfriends in my life to keep me sane! I love coffee dates with my friends for my emotional balance. Mentally, I surf twice a week to stay in love with paddling.

ACA: *Can you tell us a bit more about your journey to the Paralympics as a paracanoe athlete—i.e., What were some of the biggest challenges you faced, and some of the victories you celebrated, along the way?*

Nichols: The biggest challenges for me were, 1) equipment, 2) support staff, and 3) financial help.

Equipment: I had to figure out how to adapt my sprint kayak to fit my specific disability. I went through 5 different versions of a bucket seat until I found a position that worked for me.

Support staff/ physical therapy/ coaching: because ParaCanoe kayak is new in the Paralympics, we don't have a lot of resources or experience to draw from. I've been left to figure out how to train for a 200m race by myself. And when I need treatment, both at competitions and at home training, I've had to tap into my community of people willing to help. Thankfully, they are abundant!

Funding: as a smaller sport and newer to the games, we have very little in the way of financial resources. I've paid out of pocket for every paddle competition I've been a part of for the last 2 years.

“Nothing is keeping me from having the best 200m race of my life.”

ACA: Do you have a favorite saying or quote that inspires you on a day to day basis?

Nichols: “Do the best you can with what you have, right now.”

ACA: What are your main goals for Rio in September? How do you define success at the games?

Nichols: My goal is to compete well. Nothing is keeping me from having the best 200m race of my life, regardless of how the podium shakes out.

ACA: Is there anything else you would like to share with the paddlesports community?

Nichols: Try sprint kayaking and wave skiing!!! So fun!



ANN YOSHIDA



ACA: When did you start paddling?

Yoshida: Like so many, I started paddling on a recreational basis. I grew up as a surfer, and later when I moved to Utah, Nevada, Korea, and Oregon, waves were hard to come by. I guess you could say, I started paddling more frequently out of the desire for time in and on the water. As a Hawaiian, water time is part of my culture; it's a resource that acts as a healing force, an equalizer, a neutralizer, and an energizer. My thoughts about the ocean also overlap with my attitude toward fresh water. When I am in the water, I feel at home with no fear or inhibitions. I can just be. I used to say the water is the closest place to heaven on earth.

It wasn't until some of my friends asked me to join Purelight Racing as an outrigger canoe paddler at the IVF worlds in 2012, that I found

the excitement of competitive paddling. I started as a team paddler, then quickly moved into the one-man canoe (va'a), and a year and a half ago I also added the kayak.

ACA: What is your favorite thing about the sport?

Yoshida: I love the symmetry of kayaking and the amount of focus that is necessary while in the boat. Unlike the va'a, the kayak is a tippy boat. So I am required to put all of my mental, physical, and emotional blocks aside and just be in the present and focus on the task at hand—that is, to stay upright, with power, speed, and technique.

ACA: Can you describe what your daily training regimen has been like, in prep for the Paralympics? (daily workouts, nutrition, etc.)

Yoshida: I would not be as competitive with-

out an excellent coach. In 2013, I met Stephen Knight and was impressed by the athletes he has helped become competitive (Ashley Thomas, Carol Rodgers, and Wes Hall). They all had three things in common: they could go straight, have fun on the water, and they possessed a desire to build the growing sport. I saw what these athletes had, and I sought out a coach that could teach me to succeed in a similar way.

As you know, paracanoeing is in its infancy, and it is being included in the paralympics for the first time this year. This means that every elite athlete has a role, not only to be physically competitive, but also to have the desire to be a trailblazer and grow the sport.

Stephen had the desire to work with me as I took a year off of work and school to learn the skills to be a competitive athlete and an ambassador of sprint kayaking.

My training is custom to my needs at the time. When I am fatigued, I rest. When I am strong, I hit it. When I need to build endurance, I build endurance and work on technique. When I need speed, I work on speed drills. This is the beauty of a fitting coach, he builds me up and pays close attention to my needs so I peak at the right time, build at the right time, fail at the right time and succeed at the right time.

I recently changed my diet from being vegetable based with some fish to being on a high protein, low processed carb. I'm not strict on my diet, but I have the desire to feed my body for optimal performance. At this stage, I'm keeping things clean and natural with a ton of water.

ACA: Besides your physical training, do you have any other practices that keep you mentally and emotionally fit?

Yoshida: My coach and I believe that the mental training is just as important for preparing for the games. My coach supports me in my decision to regularly attend church as well as practice meditation techniques, such as evocative visualization, mindfulness, and mantras. I think there is a huge difference that visualization provides to an athlete's mental and physical state. I could probably write a book on this subject.

ACA: Can you tell us a bit more about your journey to the Paralympics as a paracanoe athlete—i.e., What were some of the biggest

challenges you faced, and some of the victories you celebrated, along the way?

Yoshida: My philosophy is: everything is possible

with the will, equipment, support, and time. As a parathlete, there is a big learning curve on how to paddle. In my case, I am paralyzed from the chest down, making a sport that is heavily weighted in the legs, hips, and torso very difficult for me to learn. Before taking my first stroke, I had to design and build equipment that would work for me.

I utilized my resources and asked fellow paracanoe paddler Vadim Kin to help me design and build a backrest to fit into the kayak and va'a. We spent some time on the water together until he came up with a good design and specs to fit my needs. I broke the unbreakable and he went back to the drawing board to develop something that would work for me. Sitting secure and supported in



the boat is a game changer for someone with my level of injury. There are a ton of levers, torques, forces, timing and flow that go into my ability to stay upright and apply power to the paddle and on the water. I kept an open mind and talked to everyone I could about designs, equipment, and materials to come up with my current seating set up.

Further, access to water is a huge challenge to paddling. Natural environments are proven to be more appealing while engaging in activities among people with disabilities, yet they are also the most inaccessible environments to people. Part of the challenge is to increase accessibility using eco-friendly designs. It takes a team of innovative experts to fulfill both needs of the environment. I enjoy all the places I have paddled and have seen so many great ways to create eco-friendly access to waterways.

Additionally, with these sprint boats being so fragile, I need another person to help carry and drop my boat in the water. I have paddled with many people around the world and I try very hard at making paddling a win-win situation for everyone I paddle with. Quite often, the people I paddle with are training for some paddle race themselves, so working together at a mutual goal helps develop an inspirational and motivational partnership.

ACA: Do you have a favorite saying or quote that inspires you on a day to day basis?

Yoshida: When we focus on being normal, we exclude the possibility of being extraordinary.

Only through getting out of my comfort zone I see miracles happen.

Talents improve by patience of hope and labor of love.

ACA: What are your main goals for Rio in September? How do you define success at the games?

Yoshida: I am going for the gold. I will attain gold through my mind being single to the goal, my body full of strength with quick fluid movement and quick recovery and rest, each cell primed and ready to give all it was created for, and my heart open to joy along the way. I will come out of this experience knowing I have done my best performance.

ACA: Is there anything else you would like to share with the paddlesports community?

Yoshida: Let today be the day you go out and enjoy God's magnificent creations.