

## **Hannah Aspden**

In an Olympic year, we learn about inspiring athletes and the people who have helped them. We celebrate their stories of perseverance and determination while their medals become measurements of success. Hannah Aspden's journey fits this model, but to stop there would be to just scratch the surface.



Andrew Rogers, Hannah Aspden, Tom Hazelett

A member of the YMCA of the Triangle Area (YOTA) Swim Team in Raleigh, North Carolina, Hannah made the U.S. Paralympic Team and won two bronze medals in Rio - in the 100 Backstroke and as a member of the 400 Medley Relay team. At 16, she was the youngest U.S. athlete to win a medal. Her Paralympic success is even more impressive given the challenge she had to overcome. Having one leg does not slow her down – she is a Paralympian who holds eight American records – but her battle with an autoimmune disorder created a greater obstacle.

Hannah tried various land sports as a child but felt most drawn to swimming. She says that she felt less different in the pool than she did on land, even with a prosthetic leg. As her coach, Tom Hazelett, puts it, "None of us was built to swim. We are all figuring it out together." After enjoying the summer swim team experience, Hannah's coaches, former YOTA swimmers, encouraged her to join the Y team at age 8. She had participated in other sports at the Y and her parents knew the team had a good reputation. Hannah integrated seamlessly into team practices and in 2013 began working with Tom two to three days a week.

Hazelett, the 2016 recipient of the Jimi Flowers Disability Coach of the Year Award, was already coaching two other Paralympic athletes and Hannah was an emerging national level swimmer. With Hannah's increasing success in national and international competition, she and Tom sketched out a plan that would culminate in her making the U.S. Paralympic Team and performing well in Rio.

Then in the Fall of 2015, Hannah started feeling constantly tired and ill. After several medical visits and tests, she was diagnosed with dysautonomia, an autoimmune disorder with no known cure. Its symptoms can only be managed with medication, dietary modifications and exercise. Initially, Hannah could not swim or go to school. Both had to be gradually re-introduced into her routine as her body regained strength. With little more than six months to go before Paralympic Trials and a body severely weakened by this autonomic nervous system disorder, Hannah and Tom began rethinking their original plan.

"Any coach can coach a 100 percent athlete," Tom explains, "but the trick is adapting when things aren't 100 percent." They scaled back from the larger goals and focused on incremental ones, and that is how they approached each day

leading up to Paralympic Trials in Charlotte in June. It was one day at a time and one step at a time, says Hannah. "Rio wasn't realistic anymore until it was announced that I made the team." Once she and her coaches knew she would compete in the Games, they developed the next part of the plan.

During the two months between Trials and the Games, Hannah felt not only the support of her coaches and family, but that of her teammates as well. While most swimmers take some time off in August, several YOTA teammates joined Hannah for her practices. "She is a great teammate and friend," reflects Andrew Rogers, Hannah's daily practice group coach who works closely with Tom. She values their support and friendship and they helped prepare her for the competition. As September grew closer, Tom and Andrew felt more confident about her training and her plan for the Games.

Once in Rio, although she remained worried about her health, she found it easier to focus on her swimming than she thought it would be. She knew her coaches and teammates were supporting her at home and having her parents in Rio was calming. She loved the whole Paralympic experience and she approached her events – five individual and one relay – one at a time, just like she had trained. While her performances were not what she and Tom had envisioned back in 2015, she remained determined and earned her first individual Paralympic Games medal on the last day of competition. The path had not been what they originally planned, but the outcome was still special.

When asked what she is most proud of, Hannah quickly shares that she is proud that she did not ever give up, even when she may have wanted to. Andrew agrees, saying that she, "just finds a way to get it done." The lesson Hannah takes from her experience in the past year is that, "It's not over until it's over. Sometimes you have to redefine your goals and still be happy when you achieve them, even if they were not your original goals." While she and her parents give credit to her coaches, Tom turns it back to Hannah. "She is driving the boat. Andrew and I are just the sails."

They are looking ahead and planning for upcoming opportunities – paralympic meets, YOTA meets, World Championships next summer and even what she will do after high school graduation in 2018. She is still learning to live with dysautonomia and her coaches, parents and teammates remain an important part of Team Hannah. "No matter who you are and what you are going through, everyone has ups and downs. It is up to you what you do. No one has a perfect life." There is no doubt that with her strength, determination and sense of perspective, Hannah will do quite well.

Note: In May, Hannah will compete in the Cincinnati Para-Open, a meet at which athletes with disabilities can receive their disability "classification" for participation in Paralympic meets. Classification is also a requirement for participation in YMCA Nationals for those using the Can-Am standards for qualification. While in Cincinnati, she will also help deliver a clinic to young athletes with different abilities. For information on the meet, please visit [www.cinciparaswim.com](http://www.cinciparaswim.com).