



Leah Robinson looks to future after missing out on Rio

BY BRIAN WILLIAMS
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When we introduced readers to Leah Robinson in our July issue, the possibility of a third trip to the Paralympics hung in the air. Would the young track star from Mannheim who toed the line in Beijing in 2008, and again in London in 2012, be selected to represent Canada in Rio de Janeiro?

She was travelling to track meets, chasing times over 400 metres that led to collecting points in a system that never did seem clear. Then came the news – there was to be no trip to Rio.

The disappointment was real, but it's now shut away behind a closed door. The lock on that door isn't a deadbolt, however, so don't jiggle the handle, just leave that door closed.

"It was a disappointment not to have gone (to Rio) but, at the end of the day, people I know and love got to go."

Robinson says she made sure to watch all of the Paralympics and seeing people have their first experience on that big stage brought back memories of Beijing in 2008 where Robinson raced as a 14-year-old.

"It was cool to see them compete at that level," she says. "I felt like a mom."

Robinson is busy, she's happy, she's just turning 23 and she's got a big year ahead of her, athletically and academically.

Athletically, she knows this is her last year of competitive running and the exit strategy she had planned to end her career remains in play.

She envisions a return to the stadium in London next summer, where the world championships will be held. It will be good for her to have a better experience on that track than she had in 2012, to walk away with a positive memory.

To accomplish this, she'll need to rely on the characteristic resilience that has served her well in the past. She skipped the world championships in 2013 and came back

to win a silver medal in the 400 metres and bronze in the 200 at the Parapan Am Games in Toronto in 2015.

But she's also very aware that she can feel herself breaking down, so it's a race against her body as well as the clock. "I need to be aware of my body," she said in our July article. "I can feel it deteriorating. I can't push it at such a high level for too long."

Robinson is right-sided hemiplegic. Her right leg is shorter than her left and she has little sensation in the right side of her body. This is due to an injury at birth, when the umbilical cord was wrapped and tangled around her neck, resulting in a depletion of oxygen to her brain.

Para-athletes are placed in categories for competition based on their impairments, called sport classes. The allowable disabilities are broken down into 10 eligible impairment types. Robinson competes as a T37. T is for track; 3 for cerebral palsy; 7 indicates the severity of the impairment with the highest number being the least severe. The highest classification is 8.

Having the same support system that has held her up all along will help but if she doesn't end up qualifying for London she says she'll be OK.

First, she's looking forward to a great final season as co-captain of the University of Guelph Gryphons sprint teams.

Academically, she is digging deeper too. Top marks are key if she hopes to be accepted to the University of Alberta in pursuit of a career in nursing. The school in Edmonton became her first choice to spend the next phase of her life after touring schools while out west in the summer for the national track championships.

But whether her next round of studies happens in Alberta or in Toronto, Robinson is certain she'll be taking a break from running.

"I will always find ways to stay active without the impact," she says.

There will be an emphasis on things that are fun – maybe even dance classes that she never experienced as a child. 