



RACING TO RIO

UM alum Megan Fisher to compete in her second Paralympic Games

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COVER STORY



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There is no gun, there is no buzzer. Megan Fisher is perched on her black Argon bike on the starting ramp, an official holding the back tire in place. Competitors are sent off at one-minute intervals. Fisher will be second from last, with the defending gold medalist behind her. The official began the five-second countdown on his fingers, turning his hand each time a second passed. When there were no fingers left, her tire was released and Fisher rolled down the ramp.

Four years later, Fisher can still chart her London Paralympic gold medal race in her head, chronicling every turn, thinking over all her strategies. She still knows where she accelerated and which side of the road was smoothest.

Since London, Fisher has had her eye on another Paralympic medal — this time in Rio, racing at Copacabana Beach. Fisher ships off to Rio on Sept. 2. She will race four times during the two-week games. The course will be challenging, due to its even terrain, where the small-framed Fisher won't have a physical advantage. She's been training constantly with rides up and down Fatzer Canyon and workouts in the Timewest. The lesser-known of the Olympic Games, the Paralympic trials were held in Charlotte, North Carolina, this July. Fisher qualified for the U.S. team, finishing the hilly course six seconds after current world champion, Shawn Merrill.

Merrill is Fisher's biggest competition in Rio. She has what Fisher calls "diesel power," a taller stature that will help Merrill power across Copacabana's flat surface.

Still, the trials didn't stand in the way of Fisher's dreams of a second Paralympic bid. Fisher received a phone call from U.S. Paralympic Cycling High Performance Director Ian Lawless in April to congratulate her.

The International Paralympic Committee decided to

guarantee Fisher's spot in what's called a B-parade. They wanted Fisher on Team USA no matter what.

Fisher's athletic prowess didn't start in the saddle. It started on the tennis court, where she learned the importance of hard work, how to be a teammate and when to push. It was tennis that brought her back to the athletic world after she lost her best friend and foot in a car crash in 2002. Cycling came later.

Fisher grew up on a farm in Canada near Calgary, Alberta. As an only child, she was shy growing up, spending time with horses, cows and dogs instead of other children.

When she was three, her parents separated. Fisher moved to Hinsdale, Illinois, 18 miles southwest of Chicago, with her mom, Sara Fisher. Fisher's dad split his time between Canada and the Philippines, where his other family lives.

Fisher and her mother were broke, and Fisher had little choice but to move in with her parents to save money. She and Fisher spent three years there. Fisher began working at a tennis club in the area to get back into the American economy. She had worked in banking in Canada.

One day that same year, Fisher picked up her daughter from day care with Fisher's first tennis racket waiting in the car. It was silver-framed, with white strings and a blue grip. "Darling" stretched in blue across it.

Fisher played all the time. Fisher inherited that love, starting off in peevish tennis with big foam balls, working her way up to regulation balls.

"Tennis makes my heart pitter-patter," she said. "A new can of tennis balls still smells like Christmas to me."

A shy girl with buck teeth and glasses, Fisher spent summers at the farm in Canada with her dad's parents. She

spent days in the hayloft with the animals. She returned to Chicago when it came time for school, but Fisher didn't connect with the kids there. Tennis and sports were an opportunity to make friends.

Fisher moved into high school, playing tennis, basketball and softball. She was fast and had flashes of brilliance but wasn't at the top of the tennis ladder. She loved the sport but didn't give all her time to the game.

Sara Jackson was the top of the top. She played tennis at University of Illinois, Chicago. At one point, she held the school record for most wins. Fisher met Jackson in 1999 at the Hinsdale Racquet Club during high school, and they became friends. Fisher set out on her own college career soon afterward, but the two kept in touch.

When it came time to pick a college, Fisher bought a university guide and started underlining programs that interested her. Schools with the most underlines became top contenders, with the University of Montana in Missoula as her first choice.

Molly Blair was a junior on the Girls tennis team when coaches assigned Fisher, a walk-on freshman, as her doubles partner. Schools were mellow and reserved, and she struggled to connect with most of her teammates. But Blair and Fisher worked well together, both being solid players with the ability to make things happen on the court.

In the winter, Blair picked Fisher up for midnight practice, then met her and the rest of the team for 7 a.m. runs. Fisher's freshman year passed in a blur of wildlife biology classes, Girlz barbeques and practice. She was excited to go home to Chicago for the summer and teach tennis lessons at a local club.

Sara Jackson taught at the club too, and the two women

became even better friends. They had a golden summer, spending their days teaching kids to love the game and their nights eating Jackson's cooking concoctions. Playing on the sun-warmed courts with Jackson made Fisher the happiest she had ever been. Jackson had graduated from University of Illinois, Chicago with a degree in psychology and was accepted into UIC's English teaching master's program for the fall. She and Fisher decided to share an apartment. They would use the week between sessions to drive to Missoula, sign a lease and drop some stuff off.

They set out on June 28, 2002 and spent the night in Mitchell, South Dakota. The next morning, they ate at Perkins and toured the Corn Palace, a tourist trap made of corn and little else.

They got back on I-90 with Jackson driving and Fisher nodding off. Their car rolled right times, the wreck so bad emergency responders didn't think anyone had survived. The front half of Fisher's left foot was ripped off, split like a deck of cards. Some of her bones were left at the scene. She had severe head trauma.

Fisher was life-flighted to Rapid City Regional Hospital. The pilot later told Fisher her condition was as bad as men he saw in Vietnam. Her mom chartered a jet from Chicago because she wasn't sure Fisher would live.

She woke up a week later without a foot. They told her Jackson was dead. The news sunk in slowly, because she was passing in and out of consciousness like a flickering light switch. She knew her foot was gone, but she couldn't think much past that. With her friend gone, there was little room for self-pity. Fisher was lucky to be alive.

As her condition improved, the hospital moved her from the ICU to the main floor and eventually to the orthopedic floor. She bounced around, in and out of surgery.

Doctors had drilled a hole in her head to relieve pressure and drain fluid. Her brain had acted like a pingpong ball, bouncing between the front and back of her skull. The trauma to her right frontal lobe was so extensive it altered her personality. She missed Fisher was no more. Outgoing and upbeat Fisher emerged. She went through multiple reconstructive surgeries on her foot. She was life-flighted back to Chicago because she couldn't sit in a car or commercial airplane.

School and tennis started without her in Missoula. Blair remembers the tennis coaches briefly mentioning Fisher's accident and that she wouldn't be rejoining them for the season. Little else was said or done. It would be two years before Blair reconnected with a more outgoing Fisher.

Rehab and sitting on the couch started for Fisher in Chicago. She was homebound, a pin holding her leg together. Her mom was her constant companion, source of food, bathroom breaks and care. They got walkie-talkies, Fisher referring to Fisher as "Mother Duck" on the airwaves.

She was fitted with a prosthesis. It was like a ski boot, only fitted to her leg and with less padding. The days passed attending physical therapy sessions, where she learned to walk again and regain her balance and strength.

The pause button was hit on Fisher's life. The days filled by vacancy. She missed tennis, especially the people she knew in that world. She was never diagnosed with depression, but she was deeply unhappy. In December, another mother duck entered Fisher's life — one who wasn't summoned over a walkie-talkie, one who came unbidden but made all the difference.



(Left) Megan Fisher takes questions from fans and shows off her silver and gold medals from the 2012 London Paralympic games on Aug. 13.

(Below) Various World Championship and Paralympic medals won by cyclist Megan Fisher are displayed on a table during a send off party for Fisher to the 2016 Rio Paralympic games on Sunday, Aug. 13. Fisher competed in the 2012 London Paralympic games winning a gold and silver medal.

