

Athletes to Watch at the Beijing Olympics: Oscar Pistorius

Oscar Pistorius won't be hard to pick out if he's able to qualify for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and line up for the 400 meters. After all, Pistorius has spent his whole life standing out from the crowd. If you're watching, he'll be the runner who, instead of fibulas and feet, will have two curved metal blades to support himself. Pistorius is a double-amputee who was born without fibulas.

Despite the disadvantages that he faced as a boy who was amputated from the knee down on both legs, Pistorius has always been focused on tackling new challenges. Pistorius competed in wrestling, rugby, water polo and tennis as a youth, and played water polo and tennis at a high enough level to be one of the best in his area. In January of 2004, Pistorius was hurt in a rugby match, and was introduced to running during his rehabilitation process. Instantly, he was hooked.

Since then, Pistorius has trained day and night to be able to compete not only against other Paralympic athletes, but able-bodied athletes as well. His Paralympics career got off to a very quick start. In the 2004 Summer Paralympics in Athens, Greece, Pistorius qualified for the final heat of the 200 meter race, even though he briefly fell during the preliminary race. When the final race arrived, Pistorius didn't fall again- instead, he set a world record tie of 21.97 seconds, beating not only double amputees like himself, but also single amputee Americans Brian Frasure and Marlon Shirley.

Pistorius didn't stop there. In 2005, he won the gold medal at the Paralympic World Cup for both the 100 and 200 meter races, even besting his previous 200 meter world record. He continued to dominate Paralympic events, winning three gold medals at the 2006 Paralympic Athletics World Championships for winning the 100, 200 and 400 meter events. Finally, in March of 2007, Pistorius set a disability sports record with a time of 46.56 in the 400 meter dash during the South African Senior Athletics Championships. He would set more records for the 100 and 200 meter races at the Nedbank Championships for the Physically Disabled later that same year.

What really turned heads, however, was Pistorius' performances against his able-bodied counterparts. In 2005, Pistorius was able to win the 400 meter race in the South African Championships with a time of 47.34 seconds. He was also a participant at Rome's Golden Gala, where he bested his previous 400 meter time with a run of 46.90 seconds, good enough for second place. At this point, Pistorius began to seriously entertain competing at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Unfortunately, the IAAF (International Association of Athletics Federations) had

other ideas. They ruled that according to their sponsored scientific study by a German man, that the conclusion had been reached that Pistorius' carbon fiber blades (known as "Cheetah" blades) gave Pistorius an unfair advantage. This was certainly a first for Pistorius, being pointed at as the competitor who had the advantage!

However, Pistorius fought with all his might to have the decision overturned, just as he had fought all his life while competing in able-bodied sports competitions. Finally, his appeal to the CAS (Court of Arbitration for Sport) was successful, as the CAS announced on May 16, 2008 that Pistorius would be allowed to compete against able-bodied athletes after all. The CAS had held their own studies that showed that Pistorius' carbon fiber blades did not provide a significant advantage over the other runners.

With that battle finally finished, Pistorius still faces an uphill battle to qualify for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China. His best time is about a second away from the Olympic qualifying time for the 400 meter run, which is 45.55 seconds (45.95 seconds if no other South African meets the lower time). If Pistorius is unable to do so, he is still a possible choice for the South African relay team. No matter what happens, if we see Oscar Pistorius line up at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, we'll be witnessing history in the making.

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