

Just keep pushing



Sarah Adam lives with MS — and is one of two women athletes on the USA Wheelchair Rugby team.

The road of life is full of twists and turns. No matter how much you try to plan your route, a detour is likely.



Sarah Adam. Photo courtesy of the Lakeshore Foundation

Sarah Adam, one of two women athletes on the USA Wheelchair Rugby team, knows all too well how an unexpected turn in the road can change your plans and your life.

Nearly 10 years ago, Adam had dreams of graduating from college and becoming an

occupational therapist, but she had to take a detour after being diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.

Now, moving full steam ahead on her new path, she hopes to add a stop along the way: being the first woman athlete to represent Team USA at the 2024 Paralympic Games on the wheelchair rugby team.

“Every single time that I’m on that court and the National Anthem is playing, and I have ‘USA’ across my chest, it still baffles me,” Adam said. “It is such a tremendous honor. Sometimes, it doesn’t sink in until that moment that I get that opportunity to represent my country and compete at the elite level against other teams from other nations.”

Where it began

When it comes to Adam’s story, she considers herself an open book. The simple reason: So many people along her journey have helped her feel comfortable with what she has gone through.

If her story can do the same for someone else, she will gladly pay it forward.

When she was in high school, Adam noticed numbness in her hand and that she would get fatigued, which caused her to cut back on the number of sports she played. Looking back, she thinks those were some of the initial symptoms of MS starting to make themselves known.

In the fall of 2014, while she was attending Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, with the hopes of becoming an occupational therapist, a professor noticed a significant weakness in her hand. That, coupled with incontinence at the young age of 23, signaled to Adam that something was not right.

Two years later, in the spring of 2016, while in graduate school and with her degree in her sights, she received her MS diagnosis. She worried that MS might prevent her from doing clinical work as an OT. So, she decided to switch to a doctoral program so she could teach when the time came.

Time is exactly what it took for Adam to come to grips with her diagnosis. Her friends and classmates did not know what she was going through, let alone her parents, who she told about nine months after being diagnosed.

“As time went on and I was able to process it, I started shifting that mindset to who better than an occupational therapist to have a diagnosis like this?” Adam said. “I have so many tools in my tool belt to manage it. I have phenomenal resources and family support and friend support. Despite it being a difficult diagnosis to hear, I was eventually able to fall back on resources and my support to be able to manage it the best way I can and just move forward with my new normal.”

Now a professor at Saint Louis University in its occupational therapy program, the Naperville, Illinois, native is imparting knowledge to future OTs.

Adam's biggest symptoms are fatigue and mobility, but in the years following her diagnosis, she has become more in tune with what her body is telling her and calls her healthcare team as soon as she notices changes.

A unique introduction

While there have been a lot of changes in Adam's life, there has been one constant: sports.

Adam has been playing sports her entire life, including softball at the collegiate level.

While she was at Washington University, part of her requirement in the occupational therapy program was to get involved in the community. Naturally, her mind gravitated to sports. She decided to branch out into parasports.

With limited familiarity with parasports, she was invited to a wheelchair rugby practice in St. Louis but fell in love right away. She became involved with the team as a volunteer and eventually moved into a coaching role.

The idea of becoming a wheelchair rugby player herself had never crossed her mind, but her MS presented her with an additional challenge.



Sarah Adam during a wheelchair rugby match. Photo courtesy of the Lakeshore

Foundation

For many, the introduction to wheelchair rugby happens after a serious spinal cord injury in a car accident or similar traumatic injury, but it was different for Adam. She began to lose function in her body and found herself making the transition from a wheelchair rugby volunteer to a wheelchair rugby player.

To be eligible for the sport, athletes must have a disability that affects their arms and legs. From there, they must get classified, a process that evaluates their hand function, core strength and more.

For Adam, her classification came in 2019, and for someone whose outlet used to be going for a run or shooting baskets, wheelchair rugby has more than satisfied her passion for sport.

"I absolutely love the peer support and the peer support groups, but there's something about being out in the real world with people with disabilities and learning from them, having the support, having somebody who gets it. That is what adaptive sports has done," Adam says "All sorts of areas pertaining to quality of life, strength, endurance, mental health, peer support, all of it resides within adaptive sports, and I can do it in a way that's fun. I shouldn't admit this. I don't really like just going in the weight room and lifting weights and getting stronger. I like doing something that's engaging and challenging cerebrally, so it's all right there in adaptive sports."

Wheelchair rugby

The object of the game is simple: carry the ball across the opponent's goal line.

But, the full-contact, 4-on-4 sport is high-scoring and full of strategy. When Adam describes it, she likens it to "full-speed bumper cars," and the action lives up to the name.

Adam is one of the primary ball carriers, so opponents are doing all they can to slam into her and prevent her from scoring, but it does not faze her.

Up until now, no woman has ever played on Team USA's Wheelchair Rugby team at the Paralympic Games, but Adam is looking to make Paralympics history in 2024. She says each year is technically a new squad for Team USA. While she is on the roster now, she hopes the tryouts this December will etch her name into the history books.

"Being able to show people that we can break down several different barriers and participate in this sport and participate as an elite athlete has been a tremendous opportunity," Adam says. "If even a little part of my story inspires somebody else or gets somebody else to break out of their bubble and try something that they're interested in, I'm happy to fill that role."

Turning the page

If you ever have the chance to meet Adam, she will introduce herself as a Team USA athlete,

a professor, a daughter, and a friend.

She will not say that she is a person with MS.

Why?

“[MS] doesn’t have to consume every moment of your world or your life,” Adam said. “It is a part of me. My MS is a part of something that I have to manage and that I work through every day. It is certainly not something I can just bury deep in the ground and pretend that it’s not something I’m dealing with, but it doesn’t have to be everything.”

While no one knows what the next page in their life story will look like, Adam has a firm grasp on her life’s motto.

“Just keep going,” Adam said. “Just keep pushing. Even though I don’t know what the end result is going to look like, or what my long-term goal is, I can see that next step, and I can make that next step. So just get up and keep moving.”