

Team Toyota athlete Billy Bridges: They said he couldn't play sports... so he tried every sport he could



Every athlete competing at the Paralympic Games or Olympic Games takes a unique journey on their way to the top. While talent, great coaching and years of hard work are elements almost all have in common, the elite athletes who represent our nation at the highest level often had to overcome seemingly impossible barriers to create opportunities for themselves. This is Billy Bridges' story.

The journey of Team Canada Para ice hockey player Billy Bridges is an unlikely and inspiring one. Born with Spina Bifida, a neural tube defect that affects the spinal cord and nerves, the Summerside, PEI native had undergone 16 surgeries by the age of 10.

Despite being told he would never be able to play sports, his mother continued to help him defy the odds and would not let him feel limited.

"She didn't allow me to make any excuses for anything. I had to take the garbage out like every other kid."

Against the odds, Billy lived through his condition without many of the typical complications associated with Spina Bifida. In his younger years, he even played sports with neighbourhood kids. He recalls playing soccer, baseball and street hockey on his crutches. But, as kids around him became more serious about sports, and street hockey was abandoned for competitive ice hockey, it was clear he was being left behind.

Billy found solace in skateboarding with his crutches and fondly recalls a life-changing moment while skateboarding in downtown Guelph. At the time, skateboarding was illegal, so when he saw an older woman approaching him yelling, he immediately thought he was in trouble. Instead, it turned out to be a woman named Colleen who was interested in introducing him to her grandson who played wheelchair basketball.

"I didn't even know what Para sports were at the time, but Colleen took me under her wing and even drove me to many different sports if my parents weren't able to."

His journey in Para sports began with soccer and basketball but his coach was always encouraging kids to try new sports - from Ultimate Frisbee to hockey - to prove to themselves there was nothing they couldn't do.

"From my coach, I learned that the only boundaries are in my head."

When he first tried sledge hockey (now known as Para ice hockey), he loved it right away, finally feeling like he could still play the game he had watched his friends progressing through as they grew up. From his first push out onto the ice, he felt free of pain, free of limitations, and just...free.

At first, it was simply recreational. Billy was just enjoying the sport. But, over time, his interest level and skillset gained traction. When he was 13 and had the opportunity to play with Team Canada athletes, he became even more passionate and driven, and he ultimately made the Paralympic team in 1998.

And the adventure isn't over. Billy and his wife have been running a hockey school for girls and women in seven different provinces for over two decades, with many girls going on to elite level teams. And, with the support of sponsors like Toyota Canada, he's able to train, play and do speaking engagements, all while managing his busy international travel schedule.

What advice would Billy give to other children born with his condition?

"Don't be afraid to be uncomfortable. Challenge your boundaries - they're all in your head. I've played so many Parasports and I keep trying them all. The ones I love the most are probably the ones that were the hardest and most uncomfortable in the beginning. Today can be anyone's starting point. You are the one who controls your tomorrow."