

Team Toyota athlete Brian McKeever: “Obstacles only become barriers if you let them”



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 have to overcome seemingly impossible barriers to create opportunities for themselves. This is Brian McKeever’s story.

Brian McKeever had an idyllic childhood in Calgary, surrounded by his family and the great outdoors. While most kids spent their Saturday mornings watching cartoons, his family was outside, playing sports and staying active. They didn’t even have a working TV.

Born to a father who was legally blind, Brian knew he was genetically predisposed to experiencing vision loss at some point in his life. But having an active father who didn’t let that slow him down helped pave the way for a fulfilling future.

“Mentorship is very important in the sports community and I was fortunate enough to have that within my own family and even in my chosen sport.”

Brian started skiing as soon as he could walk – following in the footsteps of his brother who eventually went on to compete in the Olympic Games.

Brian didn’t really have a sense of how important the Olympic Games were until his parents actually fixed their TV *just* for the Games when they were hosted in Calgary in 1988. Learning about the participating countries in school, coupled with the excitement of having the Games in his own hometown and enjoying the events with his family, solidified his love of sport and the importance of the Olympic Games for him. And he began to dream big.

Skiing continued to be his family’s preferred sport as it was something they could all do together. Brian was an active racer by the age of 12 and, by age 18, he was on Canada’s World Junior team. Around the same time, he started experiencing his anticipated vision

loss, and Stargardt Disease took hold. Thankfully, he'd been training for this moment, and with a strong foundation of balance, skills and the mentorship of his father, he was ready.

"In the start, it was very hard. There was a sense of loss. It took me time to understand that as well. But I was fortunate enough to have friends and family who supported me, and I had been learning about vision loss my whole life. I always told myself I would continue to race until it's wasn't safe to race anymore."

Just two years after he lost his vision, Brian was approached by the Canadian Paralympic ski team. They made him realize he could have the international ski career he dreamed of - even if it wasn't exactly how he imagined it. His coaches encouraged him to change his perspective: He wasn't *giving up* able-bodied skiing. He was *supplementing it* with his Paralympic training.

Today, Brian lives by the quote "obstacles only become barriers if you let them" and shares it with others during his ongoing speaking engagements where he encourages parents of children with disabilities who dream of success in sport.

"It's important to be realistic, but it's also important to normalize a disability. Don't let your kids see the disability. Treat them normally and deal with each challenge in the moment, like my parents did with me. Putting limitations on people makes it harder for them to achieve their goals."

Brian may not have envisioned himself as a Paralympic athlete when he first dreamed of becoming an elite athlete, but he has certainly done himself, his parents and his country proud.