

From off the rails to on the fast-track: Team Toyota athlete Cynthia Appiah overcomes multiple barriers en route to becoming an elite level bobsleigh athlete



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 need to overcome seemingly impossible barriers to create opportunities for themselves. This is Cynthia Appiah's story.

Team Canada bobsleigh athlete Cynthia Appiah has clear memories of the challenges she faced growing up – memories that fuel her desire to succeed today – and to encourage other young women and athletes to look beyond their circumstances to follow the path of their dreams.

“I’ve endured a lot to get where I am today. From overcoming racial bias within the sport, to finding the confidence I needed despite the conditions where I grew up and finding the means to cover the huge expense of training at an Olympic level.”

Growing up, the second oldest of four children to Ghanaian immigrants recalls sports always being a part of her family’s life, even though they lacked the financial resources to pursue a range of activities, let alone look ahead to becoming a world class athlete.

With a strong desire to excel in sport, Cynthia stumbled upon track and field– an option that was affordable to her parents, yet not as exciting to her as the soccer she longed to play at the time.

Track became a passion she trained hard at and heartily succeeded at, earning herself a scholarship to York University. But a visit from Ontario Bobsleigh piqued her interest. She recognized she had complimentary skills from her track and field experiences and her journey to become a world class athlete took a turn.

With a solid foundation in throwing, lifting and running, Cynthia quickly pivoted her training to bobsleigh as a brake-woman. But years of missing family events, the financial strain of the sport, and the disappointment of being relegated as an alternate weeks before the

Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018 nearly derailed her dream of competing for Team Canada.

Instead, she dug deep and continued with her goal, this time as a bobsleigh *pilot*. She focused on monobob, which requires athletes to not only push but also steer a bobsleigh at high speed and through sharp corners. It's a highly skilled position that usually requires at least eight years of training before competing at the Olympic level. But, channeling all the skills she acquired in her previous sports, she took herself to task, completing a normal eight-year commitment to training in just four. Now, she has her sights set on competing for Team Canada at the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022.

Cynthia also spends time sharing her own story to help inspire other young Canadians – especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds – through her work with *Classroom Champions* and *Fast and Female*.

“I want to share my successes to encourage others who have grown up like me to break down those negative stereotypes, and to push them to try to succeed even where the odds aren't in their favour.”

Now a *Team Toyota* athlete and on track to compete for Canada at the Olympic Winter Games, Cynthia looks back on her story and could not be prouder. She's still that girl who lived in government housing, and who surpassed her goals even when she had trouble believing in herself, but today she knows she's exactly where she's supposed to be.