

# BOUND FOR GLORY

Take one expert para rowing coach and two skilled para athletes, and what do you get? A winning team.



## Russell's Story

Russell's disabilities are not readily apparent, and he's worked to keep it that way. He's tall and lean and looks strong. But looks are deceptive. If you watch Russell in motion, you begin to see the cracks in that picture. He's made what appear to the untrained eye to be small adjustments, but they speak to a body that's put together a little differently. His chest, his hips, and his ankles haven't the strength, the dexterity, or the range of motion that they're meant to, which makes many



Alice follows the double at a slight distance, wheeling her launch around now to move from starboard to port. "Match hands out of bow," she calls to the scullers. "Stay long."

The scullers move in unison, arms and body forward, body and arms back. Up to the catch, blades through the water, release. The movement is easy, familiar. Unless you look closely, you may not realize what's very different in this boat: these scullers are rowing "dead slide." The seat is fixed. There is no power coming from the legs, the traditional powerhouse of rowing. All the work instead is in the upper body.

This is para rowing, and this is no leisurely afternoon row. Scullers Russell Gernaat and Laura Goodkind are in training.

Last year, after only seven months of rowing together, Russell and Laura won the USA trials for the world championships and then made the top eight in the race itself, qualifying themselves as contenders for the US spot in the upcoming Paralympic trials. Now they're in training for those trials, coming up in Sarasota,

of the routine movements that most of us take for granted either difficult or outright impossible.

Medically, Russell is classified as having Poland's Syndrome (no pectoral muscles on the right side of his chest and only half a lat), femoroacetabular impingement (extra bone along the socket portion of the ball-and-socket joint that is the hip), and Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease (a loss of muscle tissue, leading to deformation in his feet and ankles). What this means for Russell is that he cannot reach with his right arm across his body or up over his head. He cannot lower himself down into a chair in the way that chairs are designed for. To go down a flight of stairs, he must angle sideways. And when he walks, he does not rock over his feet in the way that able bodies do. He must walk with his feet pointed out, to make up for the flexion that his ankle does not have.

But Russell doesn't think much about these differences. For him, all his life, his differences and the way that others have sometimes responded to them are just so much more "fuel for the fire." The fire that burns inside him to become bigger, better, stronger.



Florida, in early April. If they qualify, as they plan to, they'll be representing the US in the 2020 Paralympics, held in Tokyo in late August. And if they qualify, they'll be signing up for the last stretch of intense training — including sessions at the Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center, and two regattas in Italy — to prepare for rowing in fine form their hardest race yet, so as to land in the top half of the field, so as to perhaps make the podium.



Quite a journey for two scullers who, not so long ago, wouldn't have seen the inside of a boat. And until 2005 certainly wouldn't have been rowing in an international competition.

It's that access, that opening of the sport to a new population, that drives their coach, Alice Hendersen, to do the work she does. When Alice herself first came to rowing, as a freshman in college, she and her teammates were following in the wake of the first women rowers to successfully campaign, against hard odds, for a seat in the boat. Alice was keenly aware of what she owed this generation that preceded her, the generation who made it possible for her to row competitively, who made it possible for her to eventually sit on the national team. When she retired from competitive rowing, Alice began coaching others, helping them to travel the road that she had. She coached the spectrum — high school, collegiate, masters — from novice rowers to elite athletes, wanting to share more and more widely that synergy that she so loved of athletes moving together on the water. And her teams did well, taking regional and national championships. Alice was bringing the sport to others, as she'd always wanted to.



### Laura's story

When Laura was born, she nearly didn't make it out of the NICU. Arriving three months too soon, she spent the first several weeks of her life struggling to live. Connected to a device that kept her breathing, to feeding tubes that bypassed her immature digestive system, she worked to grow big enough and strong enough to leave. The doctors, however, warned her parents that this might be only the start of her troubles. And that was so.

By age one, Laura was formally diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy, a neurological condition that affects movement and motor control throughout the body. Her preschool years were filled with therapy – physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy – and punctuated with surgeries.

And her circle of inclusion might have ended there. But then, working through the three-year process of attaining her international referee license, Alice discovered para rowing. And she felt a whole new level of connection. Here was a community no one had thought could manage in rowing, let alone excel. Just as it had once been for women. Just as might have been the case for her.

She knew she'd found a new direction for her career. She'd become a para rowing coach.

To no one's surprise, she's thrown herself into that work with the same level of dedication she's applied throughout her career. In 2015, Alice joined the staff of Bair Island Aquatic Center (BIAC) as Director of Adaptive Rowing. In four years, she has grown the fledgling program to astonishing proportions, placing BIAC at the forefront of the revolution in adaptive rowing and making it one of the biggest programs in the country.

Alice and BIAC were the natural choices for Russell and Laura, as they began excelling individually in their competitions and in their development as rowers. Just as each was for the other, as they began thinking seriously about a new competitive doubles partner. The three of them met up in January of last year for a trial run, and a new team was born.

Russell and Laura face enormous hurdles in the boat. The equipment is made for able-bodied rowers, who in addition to skill are matched in terms of key factors such as gender, height, and age. Russell and Laura are matched only in terms of being skilled para rowers who each row arms and body (classified as "PR2"). But he's 6'5" and she's 5'7". So they are not well matched in terms of the natural length of their stroke. And he's a he, while she's a she. That's by design in the context of para rowing, which, in the name of diversity, calls for mixed-gender boats. The upshot, though, is that not being matched by gender, they are not matched in strength or weight. And of course, there's the rowing level itself, PR2. No racing shell is made for rowing dead slide.

And so, while training, the team must experiment with the equipment, so that Alice can figure out the best way to set up the boat and the rigging to keep Russell and Laura comfortable as fixed-seat rowers of wildly different heights and moderately different strength, while also optimizing them to be fast. It's a tough challenge.

When she was three, she underwent Achilles heel cord lengthening on both of her legs. Three years later, she underwent the same surgery a second time. In between, when she was four, both her femurs were broken and rotated. For the next six weeks, she was in a half-body cast, with her legs connected by a vertical bar to stabilize them in a better position.

When she grew to adulthood, as the doctors had predicated, other medical issues came tumbling her way. Narcolepsy, which means dysregulated sleep, excessive daytime sleepiness, and the risk of cataplexy. Dysphagia, a swallowing disorder related to her CP, which can make eating difficult. And mast cell disease, which has meant four anaphylactic episodes to date.

Laura was counseled to stop rowing. She was counseled, in fact, not to be so active. But the little girl who the doctors had said might never walk doesn't give up that easily. As a child, when she was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, she always said, "An Olympian." This might be the year she attains that goal.



Then there's a little factor called geography.

Competitive able-bodied rowers typically train many times a week, often daily. That's because distance is generally not an issue. If they are on the national team, for example, they're housed together during the training season, which for the national championships runs eleven months, and they'll train six and seven times a week for the first several months, ratcheting up in the last two to three months to double that.



By contrast, Russell and Laura train together every three to four weekends, for three and a half days, generally twice a day. Not by choice, but by necessity. The two of them live in Southern California and Alice is based in Northern California. When they train at BIAC, as they do all winter, when the tidal water is not an issue, Russell and Laura will drive six to ten hours to buy themselves those three and a half days of training.



Come summer, they'll train instead at the Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center, at a cost of \$150 a day per person. But they trade the expense for the still water and the reliable times they can achieve. When the team trains at this elite rowing center, it means a few hours in the car for the two rowers and a plane ride for Alice. All told, Russell and Laura train together 6 times a month, in contrast to the 60 that a competitive rower on the national team is granted. That's 90 percent less training time for the para rowers, on equipment they must struggle with.

It's a good thing that Russell and Laura are fighters. They've been in training for this all their lives, with struggles deep and persistent, struggles that have made them hard and strong. They've the determination, the grit, the sheer dogged stubbornness, to stay the course, to buck the "no" that life seems so often to offer, and so they bring to their sessions on the water a passion fierce enough to match their coach's. None of what they've accomplished so far is easy, and it's not going to get any easier. Far from it.

But this is a team that's up to the challenge.

