TOKYO BOUND

The lives of one expert para rowing coach and two skilled athletes intertwine in the push for excellence this fall

Laura's story

Late one afternoon in the spring of 1986, Laura Goodkind slid into this world squalling, three months too soon, weighing just over three pounds. Her chances of survival were slim. She spent her first eight weeks in the NICU, in an incubator, connected to various support systems. There was the positive pressure device to help sustain her breathing, the feeding tubes to bypass her digestive system, as it was not working properly, and several blood transfusions. The doctors warned Laura's parents that with this tough start, she would be vulnerable to a host of medical conditions.

It's a prediction that has played out over her lifetime, from the earliest days on.

Home from the hospital, the infant Laura soon began exhibiting other difficulties. Babies born that early have some catching up to do, but Laura was particularly slow to do the sorts

of things that most babies begin to do routinely, like roll over or hold up her head. At the age of one, Laura was formally diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy (CP), a neurological condition that affects movement and motor control throughout the body, which means also muscle tone and posture, in some cases even swallowing. CP is caused by damage to the developing brain, most often before birth, though in Laura's case, it could well have been in those first tenuous months of life. As an infant, she was so small that the sort of very small blood clots that typically form and then break up may have lodged in her brain, causing a stroke.

Laura's parents were warned that she'd likely never walk, but as a toddler, all Laura wanted to do was to keep up with her older brother. One day, she pulled herself up onto his pedal car, with its red body and yellow roof, and started walking. Her toes overlapped, which meant that she often tripped over her own feet, but she was moving. And she was loving it.

Laura's preschool years were filled with therapy — physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy — and punctuated with surgeries. 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 the cast came off, she was expected to take a few steps and stumble to the ground, her legs giving way as is typical of muscles weakened by months of casting. Instead, she began running around the room with such vigor that the physical therapist had to intervene to stop her from damaging the gains painstakingly made to her still-fragile legs.

Clearly, this girl was a fighter.

And that's the kind of fight she's needed. It's the kind of fight that eventually led her, despite the physical challenges, to sports. In high school, Laura pursued four different varsity sports. In community college, she played on two college-level teams. But now the little girl who'd always declared that she wanted to be an Olympian when she grew up was beginning to hit a wall. Able-bodied sports were slowly pulling out of her reach, and she was completely unaware at that point of adaptive sports.

Meanwhile, as predicted in those first few weeks of life, other medical problems were surfacing. In 2009, when she was 24, a set of symptoms that would later be officially diagnosed as narcolepsy began to grow more and more severe. She was already being medicated for excessive daytime sleepiness, but now coming out of sleep, she would often experience full-body paralysis and hypnopompic hallucinations. During the day, strong emotions or other triggers began bringing on cataplexy, a sudden loss of muscle tone, sometimes to paralysis, meaning that a part of her would go slack or buckle. The episodes would typically last a minute or two and she retained consciousness. More worrying was the sleepiness. She began scheduling in a 10- to 20-minute nap each day, to prevent herself from dropping precipitously and without warning into sleep in the middle of whatever it was she happened to be doing.

During this period of time, Laura was unable to participate in sports at all. Still, she pressed on with school, though with the onset of the narcolepsy symptoms, her energy levels were low and her sleep dysregulation meant that she often dropped into sleep

during class. Getting through classes and absorbing the material was difficult, but she stuck with it. In 2013, the summer before she left for Denmark to study abroad, she developed dysphagia, a swallowing disorder related to her CP. Gamely, she went ahead with her academic plans. While she was abroad, she was hospitalized seven times, developing sepsis twice. That second time nearly took her life. With some flexibility on the part of her professors, she did complete her program, even taking the psychology award in her second term. But she hadn't yet fully recovered from her bouts with the new disorder.

Back in the States, the recovery process was slow. A dietician she was conferring with suggested that she shift her lifestyle to spend time with people "more like" herself. Laura knew what that meant: people with physical disabilities. The typical solution, support groups, didn't interest her. That wasn't her style. Her heart was set on sports. The dietician argued with her, trying to dissuade her, saying that Laura was too sick for that kind of competition. But finally, relenting, she suggested that Laura do some research to find the right sport for her – and the right group. That's when Laura found the Paralympic Sport Club. She began rowing in the fall of 2014.

In 2015, pursuing both table tennis and rowing, she participated in the US Open Table Tennis Championships in July and then a month later, she rowed her first ever regatta. She was told that she was good enough to go elite with either sport. With the 2016 Rio Paralympics approaching, it was time to make a decision. She chose rowing.

In 2016, she and her partner won the USA trials, but lost by 1.69 seconds to Russia in the contest for the final two spots to compete in Rio. The subsequent Russia scandal altered that landscape, and ten days before they'd need to leave for Brazil, Laura and her sculling partner were offered the spot. They accepted. Less than two weeks later, they were competing on the international stage – despite not having trained together for more than four months. Laura and her partner came in 10th, but the experience was invaluable, exhilarating. Laura wanted more.

Outside life in the boat, her medical woes continued. In late 2017, during the sweeping fire season in Southern California, she developed mast cell disease. After three anaphylactic episodes within about a week, she was told to stay indoors. When a fourth episode soon followed, she was hospitalized. Testing showed that she had a severe form of the disease where virtually anything could, and often did, become a trigger. She began receiving injections to help control the symptoms, but then in May of 2019, she became allergic at the anaphylactic level to the injections themselves. She saw a world specialist, who wanted to try her out with a 24-hour Benadryl drip via a port, but with her active lifestyle, compounded by the risk of infection with the port, Laura opted not to follow that course.

She was counseled to back away from the rowing. But Laura had found her sport, and she was not about to let go. Determined not only to continue but to improve, she competed at the World Championships in 2017 and 2018, each time with a new partner, each time with a different coach. Laura and her partners were placing adequately, but not dazzlingly. Something would have to change. She needed a permanent partner, a permanent coach. She wanted structure in her training. She wanted consistency in her rowing. She wanted to excel.

It was time for her to meet Russell Gernaat and Alice Henderson.

Russell's story

Elite para rower Russell Gernaat had been rowing for just a little over three years when he met Laura. In those three years, he'd excelled, pulling the kind of triumphs a rower of many years longer would be proud of. But that's down to excellent condition, training, and sheer gumption. Russell is a fighter too.

Russell's disabilities are not readily apparent, and he's worked to keep it that way. Born with a span of difficulties, Russell is tall and lean and looks strong. Looks are deceptive. If you watch him 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 of the routine movements that most of us take for granted either difficult or outright impossible.

As a result of Poland Syndrome, Russell has no pectoral muscles on the right side of his chest and only half a lat. Missing these muscles, he cannot reach across his body from the right. So, for example, when putting on a seat belt, he must grab his right arm with his left and pull it across his body and up to his left shoulder to reach the seat belt, and then guide the right arm back down to snap it in. He cannot lift his right arm above his head. The left must assist it, both in going up and in staying up. When he pushes out in front with both arms, the right arm falls about four inches shorter than the left. With no pecs on that side, the shoulder does not come forward. The right side also fatigues faster, and not slowly, but all at once.

He also has femoroacetabular impingement (FAI), meaning that extra bone has grown along the socket portion of the ball-and-socket joint that is the hip, the result of which is that the hips do not move as designed. He cannot squat, which means that sitting is a problem, as are stairs, particularly if he's descending. To sit in a chair, Russell must hold onto something and lower himself into it, bearing his full weight on his arms. He reverses the process to stand back up. To sit on the ground or any level surface, he must cross his legs if he wants to remain upright. He cannot stretch his legs out in front of him. His hips simply do not move that way. To go down a flight of stairs, he must angle himself sideways.

And the last of the triad, he has Charcot-Marie-Tooth (CMT) disease, a motor and sensory neuropathy of the peripheral nervous system that leads to a loss of muscle tissue and

touch sensation and which, in Russell's case, most directly affects his feet and ankles. His ankles have no flex, which means that when he walks, he cannot shift his weight and knees over his toes. He must walk with his feet pointed out, so that he rocks over his foot from the outside heel to the inside ball. During training exercises as a young man, this condition meant that when he was required to run on sand, the inability of his foot and ankle to flex as he was coming up and out of the sand with each step put such a strain on his bones that his second metatarsal broke.

But Russell doesn't think much about these differences and how they might limit what he can do, an attitude which he attributes in part to the family he grew up in. Fully supportive and loving, they were nonetheless matter-of-fact about Russell's challenges, encouraging him never to seek sympathy, never to back down from a challenge. The teasing and bullying Russell experienced as a kid for being different (with his shirt off, the missing muscles in his chest were evident), and the later prejudice he faced in the army, only provided, as he says, more "fuel for the fire." That would be the fire that burns inside him to become bigger, better, stronger.

His family like to tell the story of when Russell was about five or six and he'd had a fever hovering around 106 for three days. He was scheduled to appear in a play at the church his family attended, and despite the fact that he was burning with fever, he insisted that he go on, that he play his part. And he did.

That fierce determination? That refusal to take no? That's Russell. That's how he takes life on and bests it.

As a young man, Russell had wanted to take that fight to the military. Two weeks after graduating high school, he was on his way to boot camp. His goal: the airborne infantry. The drill sergeant he was assigned, however, took one look at him – seeing not the young man, but only the disability – and set out to have him discharged. Sent off to see the doctor, Russell passed with flying colors. So, the next week the sergeant sent him again, this time higher up the chain of medical command. And so it went for weeks, until Russell found himself before the head of medical at Fort Benning, Georgia. Looking over Russell's records, and also taking a look at Russell himself, the doctor said, "Well, you've done everything you've been asked to, and you've made it this far. I don't see why I should send you home now."

Russell returned to the barracks triumphant. When it came time for the final test, though, that same drill sergeant found a way to disqualify him.

Back home, Russell launched into an intensive training program. It was about that time that a navy recruiter got wind of him and began recruiting him for the Navy SEALs. Russell trained for the next two years while being forward-deployed out of Japan. He then began to go methodically through the list of requirements to enter BUDS (basic underwater demolitions and SEAL training). When he got to the last item on the list, the pressure and oxygen test, he ran into a problem. In the test, the candidate gets into a chamber that is pressurized to the equivalent depth of 110 ft, and then breathes oxygen to see whether narcosis develops. When Russell arrived for the test, he was asked to strip down to his

skivvies. The lieutenant took one look at Russell's chest and dismissed him. Russell protested that he had his open water diver card, that he'd already been down to 100 feet. The lieutenant wasn't to be dissuaded, not that day. He finally agreed to let Russell return if Russell would agree to a series of tests at the hospital.

But that was only a delay tactic on the lieutenant's part, because when Russell returned, having passed the hospital tests, the lieutenant told him that he'd gone direct to Washington for the right not to allow Russell into the tank.

Russell, however, wasn't done yet. Talking with the divers he'd since made friends with, he discovered that this lieutenant wasn't the only one giving the PnO2 test. Russell made plans to take the test with another tester, and soon found himself in possession of orders to report to BUDS and to class up with 157.

That's how Russell rolls.

Rowing is something Russel had always had an interest in, but hadn't been able to find his way to as a young man. Just before shipping out to SEAL training, he'd gotten married to his sweetheart, and before long his adult life was bound up in other responsibilities. He and his wife had a son. They each had careers. The years flew by. Every so often, Russell thought about finally taking up rowing, but there just never seemed to be time.

Then in late 2015, after 22 years of marriage, he lost his wife to a final brutal battle with cancer. She had been in remission for about a year, after the initial treatments of chemo and a couple of surgeries, but when the cancer returned, it was swift. With their son off to college, Russell found himself very alone in an empty house. He needed to do something to feel motivated again, something absorbing, something active.

That's when he met Alice Henderson, the para rowing coach at Bair Island Aquatic Center (BIAC) in Redwood City.

Alice's story

Alice has been with the sport of rowing since 1982, as a freshman in college. She'd given herself eight weeks, when she first began, to decide whether she liked it or not. Within three, she was hooked. Throwing herself wholeheartedly into it, she redshirted in her second year and set her sights on the University of Washington, wanting to test herself against the best in the country, wanting to be part of the top program in the States. In her rookie year at UW, she made the JV boat. She rowed her next two years at the university in the varsity eight, and in her senior year, her program was the first ever to sweep nationals.

Rowing competitively when she did, in the late 1980s, Alice met and rowed with some of the women who had opened up the sport, and opportunities for other young women, through Title IX. In those early days, the women rowers had had a broom closet for a locker room and the oldest boat in the boathouse to take out – when it didn't interfere with the men's training. They'd worked with the few coaches who were willing to "let the girls row." These earliest women rowers had blazed a path that Alice and her teammates were now able to follow, meaning that they had it a little easier, meaning that they were able to row at all. Alice has never forgotten that, carrying this experience with her into the rest of her rowing career.

After training post-college for another two years with the national team, Alice retired from competitive rowing, making the natural transition to coaching. She coached the spectrum – high school, collegiate, masters – from novice rowers to elite athletes, wanting to share, more and more widely, that synergy of athletes moving together on the water. And her teams did well. Her high school girls won regional and national championships. After just four years of being a program, her collegiate team won the NW small college championships. In 1994, she was appointed the head coach for the junior women at the US Olympic Festival. But that coaching phase of her career was coming to a close. After seven years of full-time coaching, it was time for a change. She and her husband had decided to start a family. And with that move, they made another, following his job to Phoenix. Alice, however, wasn't done with rowing, not by a long shot. In Phoenix, she was a founding board member of the Rio Salado rowing club and she helped to establish rowing on Tempe Town Lake.

In 2010, Alice and family returned to California, where both Alice and her husband are originally from. Casting about for new ways to be involved with the sport, Alice began studying for her international referee license – and that's when she discovered para rowing, and a new passion. She'd always been all about opening up the sport to new rowers. Here was a community that had, until recently, largely been without access to rowing.

Historically, rowing was a sport designed for (as Alice is happy to expound upon) 20-year-old 6'4" white college men, à la Boys in the Boat. Change came late, more than a century on. When Alice entered the sport, women had only just a generation before won the right to a seat in the boat. In the ensuing years, Alice has seen the sport opening up to a wider and wider range of potential rowers. Lightweight men, who are the same size as open weight women. Then lightweight women, who are similar in size to high school kids. Then adults who'd never rowed in college, in various "masters" programs at rowing clubs (where "juniors" are the high school kids). And now most recently, with para rowing, which opens the sport up to a population no one ever would have dreamed could row, let alone competitively.

A beneficiary of the trail blazing that enabled her to take her place in the boat and to be part of the joy that is competitive rowing, Alice wanted to do for others what others had done for her. She wanted to be part of opening the sport up even more widely, making it available to a population that until now had been entirely locked out of many opportunities in life. She wanted to give back.

Studying for her referee license was a rigorous three-year process, and Alice promised herself that if she made the cut, she'd become a para coach. She did, and she has. In 2015, she was hired at BIAC as Director of Adaptive Rowing, where in four years she has built the fledgling program to astonishing proportions, placing BIAC at the forefront of the revolution in adaptive rowing. BIAC is now one of the biggest programs in the country, training athletes who range in age from teenagers to retirees.

Adaptive rowing is a completely different sport than able-bodied rowing, with different classifications and different requirements of the equipment. Para rowers are classified as PR3, PR2, or PR1. PR3 rowers use all three muscle groups: arms, body, legs. This is rowing similar to the rowing one sees at the Olympics. PR2 rowers use only two muscle groups: arms and body. They row "dead slide," meaning that they row on a fixed seat, which is an entirely different sort of rowing. PR1 rowers use only arms, and they row only in singles.

Alice began working with Russell in 2016, when he first came to her with his burning need to learn to row. She put him on the erg, gave him some instruction, and off he went to practice. Two weeks later, he competed in an erg event, with a very fine showing. Two months later, he was hitting the fast times. That's when Alice knew she had a winner. They rustled up a partner, and in 2017, Russell and his partner won the USA trials in the PR3 2x, that is, sculling together in a double. But Russell, who presents well, had initially been misclassified. Alerted to this possibility by an international classifier, they gathered the paperwork necessary to classify him as a PR2 rower. With Russell being reclassified, Alice scouted around to find him a new partner. Laura had been the best PR2 female rower in the United States for the previous three years, and so she was an obvious choice. In January of last year, Russell, Laura, and Alice met up in person for the first time at the Chula Vista Elite Athlete Training Center to give rowing together a go, and the new partnership was born.

The team and their coach

As coach and manager for the team, it is Alice's job to make Russell and Laura each better athletes individually, to make them better together, and to set them up to be successful by organizing the best resources for them.

These tasks are as formidable as the challenges facing the team. First there are of course the disabilities, which make the activity of rowing far more difficult than for able-bodied rowers. But then there is the equipment. As with any sport at the elite level, the fine-tuning of the equipment is crucial. But the boats, the rigging, the oars, have to be adapted for the kind of rowing that PR2 (arms and body only) or PR1 (arms only) rowers engage in. And then there is the challenge of the inevitable mismatch, along one or more points, in the adaptive rowers to be paired.

In able-bodied rowing, rowers are paired by ability and build. Factors such as height, strength, and age come into play, as well as rowing styles and stats. For the span of the sport, the boats have been designed for this kind of balance. The advent in recent decades of stronger, lighter materials and better data has only intensified this process. For rowers of a given build, a given capability, a given age, there are types of boats, specific

settings for the rigging, typical adjustments for the oars. These factors have been determined over many, many years of competitive rowing. But when you've got a 6'5" man paired with a 5'7" woman, as is the case with Russell and Laura? That's difficult. Normally, rowing partners are similar in height, but there are 10 inches between these two, which makes rigging more challenging.

Nowhere else would you make up a boat like this. But the rules of para rowing, not to mention logistics, make boats like these more the norm than the exception. Para rowing is regulated for diversity: boats are always mixed gender and they are mixed equally. If there are two rowers in a boat, one must be a man, the other a woman. If there are four, two are men, two women. In the able-bodied world, this is not the case. Men are paired with men; women with women. Then, too, the para rowers must match in terms of their classification level. Russell and Laura are both PR2 and they both live near enough to each other to make rowing together possible, though only just. As para rowers, neither is likely to find another boatmate that matches their builds, as well as their PR designation and geography.

And the geography often makes rowing together regularly another formidable hurdle to be overcome. To prepare for the world championships, the senior national men's and women's teams generally row and train together from September through August, including attending other competitions during that time. The junior national team train at home in their own programs throughout the year, training six times a week with their high school team, after which they'll come together from across the country for ten weeks before the championships to train twice daily. 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 geography. 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 tides are not an issue, they'll travel six to ten hours to buy themselves those three and a half days of training. Come summer and they train instead at Chula Vista, 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 with it. 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. Overall, Russell and Laura train together 6 times a month, in contrast to the senior teams' 60. That's 90 percent less training time for the para rowers, on equipment they must struggle with.

The disabilities themselves are just the start of the challenges facing these two.

Which makes the coaching task that much more difficult. Alice and her team are laying the groundwork on how to set up a boat and the rigging to keep Russell and Laura both comfortable as fixed-seat rowers of wildly different heights, while also optimizing them to be fast. With para rowing being a relatively new sport, and with the increase three years ago in the Paralympic course from 1K to 2K, there's little data out there, and so Alice must experiment.

They've been training together, and experimenting, for the last year. Now all that training is about to pay off. At the end of February, the team will join the US elite para rowing camp at Chula Vista. In early April, it's off to Sarasota, Florida, for the Paralympic trials. If

they qualify in April, as they plan to, then they'll fly directly to Varese, Italy, to begin preparing for the 2020 World Rowing Cup II, held May 1–3. After that race, they'll do a para regatta the following week in Gavirate. This rowing in Italy will give the team the opportunity for some focused and consistent training of the sort that other teams have as a matter of course, and help to school them in what they need to do to get ready for the Paralympics themselves. After the para regatta, they'll have about two and a half months back in California for the final stretch of fine-tuned training for the Paralympic Games, held August 25–30 in Tokyo.

It's a long road, and a hard one. But the team is feeling confident these days, based on the hard work and the long hours they've already put in. Russell and Laura's drive, coupled with Alice's passion and her deep experience, have already shown results. Their goal for 2019 was to win the USA trials and to make top eight at the world championships by qualifying the boat for the Paralympics for the United States. They hit both those goals, becoming the first PR2 2x USA boat to qualify at the first chance regatta. Not bad for their first seven months together.

And now they're in the last stretch of training for this 2020 run of trials and races. They've secured a spot for Team USA, and their goal is to win the USA trials in April and then to be in the top half of the field in Tokyo, with a stretch goal of making the podium. It won't be easy. But being the best in the world never is.