

Interview: Laura Jensen

Laura Jensen, a nineteen-year-old athlete from British Columbia, is in Montreal this week along with hundreds of other top swimmers from across Canada. They are all here to try out for places on the Canadian Olympic and Paralympic swimming teams. Laura has cerebral palsy and is competing for one of only fourteen spots on the Paralympic team. Express Yourself (EY) sat down with Laura to talk to her about her ambitions and how she got to where she is today.

EY: Good morning, Laura. Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with us.

Laura: Good morning.

EY: To begin, can you tell us a little bit about yourself: where you were born, how you became interested in swimming, what motivated you to go all the way to trying out for the Paralympics?

Laura: Sure. I was born in Fort St. Jean in northern British Columbia. I am the oldest of four children. I was born with cerebral palsy, a condition that affects my body movements and muscle coordination. Cerebral palsy affects my right arm and hand. When I was little, my parents took me to do physiotherapy in water, and I liked it so much that my mom decided to enroll me in swimming lessons, and later, in competitive swimming.

EY: Did you move straight to the national team?

Laura: No! Most swimmers begin competitive swimming at the age of five. I began pretty late, when I was about eleven. I started swimming in Summer Club, a swimming training program from May to July. Later, I joined Winter Club to train from September to June. There were lots of competitions, and I had to compete at the provincial level and then at the national level before I could try out for a place on the Paralympic team.

EY: Didn't you find it difficult to balance school and training for swimming?

Laura: Not really. I don't go to school; instead I do Distance Education and take all my classes over the Internet. I haven't finished yet, but I will soon; right now, I am more focused on swimming.

EY: Do you compete against other swimmers who are able-bodied or against athletes like you who have a disability?

Laura: I compete in SWAD, which means "Swimmers with a Disability," but I train with other able-bodied swimmers. To make the Paralympic team, however, we have to achieve a minimum qualifying standard: for example, I have to swim 100-metres freestyle in two minutes or less, or I won't make the team; we are really racing against the clock, not just other swimmers.

EY: What is the most challenging part about swimming with a disability?

Laura: I have to concentrate very hard to get my right side to work. It is difficult to think about everything at once: while I am focusing on my arms, for example, I forget about my legs.

EY: What is the best part about swimming for you?

Laura: I love the fact that when I am in the water I feel just like everybody else.

EY: Are you looking forward to going to the Paralympics in Beijing?

Laura: Absolutely! Of course, China has a reputation for not respecting human rights and people like me who are different, but I am sure that because of all the world media attention the situation will change and improve.

EY: Speaking of the media, when can we see your event on television?

Laura: I don't know. The media doesn't cover the Paralympics as well as the regular Olympics. Only a few hours a week of the entire Paralympics are shown on television. It is pretty frustrating. The media are getting better, but it is a slow process.

EY: Thank you so much, Laura, for taking the time to talk to us. Good luck making the national team and competing in Beijing!