

MARISSA

Papaconstantinou

Canada's Rising Sprint Star is Back on Track

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Born without a right foot, Marissa Papaconstantinou began her para-athletic career soon after being fitted with her first running blade at age 11. At age 15, she made an impressive international debut finishing seventh in the 200m and eighth in the 100m track events at the 2015 World Championships. The following year, she made her Paralympic Games' debut in Rio De Janeiro.

Now, at just 21 years of age, Marissa has lived the extreme highs and lows of competitive sport. A Canadian record holder in the 100-metre event and a Paralympian at just 16, the below-knee amputee sprinter has had seasons derailed with injuries forcing her off the track and out of competitions like the 2019 Parapan Am Games. But it was those experiences – perhaps the lows more than the highs – that prepared her for 2020 and the pandemic's postponement of the Paralympic Games in Tokyo. She spent some time with ParaSport® Ontario's executive director Jeff Tiessen to talk track, training and the trials of 2020.

PO: *Let's get right to it. Canada's athletics community had high hopes for you in Tokyo. Did you hold those same expectations for yourself?*

Marissa: I've had some real hardships leading up to 2020 in terms of injuries. Those tough times made me change my mindset and my focus. I'm now all about taking everything day by day, riding the wave and taking things that I can't control in stride. Putting too much pressure on myself started to wear me down, and wear me down early in my career as I see it, so I needed to start thinking more long-term instead of right here, right now.

PO: *That said, how did you respond to the news of the postponement of the 2020 Paralympic Games?*

Marissa: I think I've handled the pandemic quite well, all things considered. My training was going great and then the world started shutting down. And then came the uncertainty of the Games. And then, the stress and anxiety. There were no training facilities and no tracks to run on. We had no way to continue to train at an optimal level. If the Paralympics were going to happen we had no way to qualify, no way to be in the shape to perform at our best. When they pulled the plug, honestly, it was actually more of a relief than a disappointment for me.

PO: *Being on a four-year training and competing schedule this had to be pretty deflating too?*

Marissa: I was able to put the pandemic in perspective early on, thanks to my promise to myself to take things day by day. I saw how it was affecting so many people. It was bigger than sport. Being able to compete is a privilege, and so much in our daily life is a privilege. I saw myself as lucky; I was healthy, and able to train in my home and go out for runs.

PO: *As a high-performance athlete, how did you adapt?*

Marissa: It's been an interesting journey. With no competitions and no team to train with, it made it hard to stay motivated... but I rode the wave, day by day. It took patience. Through injuries I've learned that you can't always construct timelines. Mentally, I used to put myself into uncomfortable situations causing more stress and anxiety. When there were setbacks it was very challenging for me to deal with them. All of that learning, and mental training, has prepared me for what has happened in 2020... controlling the things you can control. Having perspective on the things you can't.

PO: *What about training? How have you managed that?*

Marissa: I'm a sprinter, but running on the road, on pavement, was not ideal and not good for my knees, particularly being an amputee. My training evolved through the pandemic. When I saw things trending toward shutting down, I had a conversation with my parents to ask them for some much-needed help. I asked them to help me with building a gym in our house. We got mats for the floor and a bar and plates for weight training. And really importantly, we got an indoor training bike for when the weather was bad. The opportunity for cross-training was something I was really fortunate to have. And I could keep up my lifting routine. I had online training meetings with my coach every weekday, to help with techniques. I connected with physiotherapists and chiropractors online as well. Overall, I maintained a good fitness level. I didn't want to lose all the hard work that I'd put in. But it's tough to make gains training that way, but I wanted to at least maintain.

PO: *How does your residual limb hold up to that kind of intensity?*

Marissa: Actually, my sound leg takes so much more load, and takes more of a beating, and it's that leg that has had most of my issues. My running socket and blade are great technology, and very comfortable. The gel liners are amazing to protect my limb.

PO: *You are in the Sports Media program at Ryerson University but train with the University of Toronto's Track Club right?*

Marissa: Yes. I train at U of T's Varsity Stadium. It works really well for me. I go to Ryerson for the program and career I want to pursue, but almost right next door is a great coach in Bob Westman, great teammates and a great facility.

PO: *Where or when did your Paralympic aspirations begin?*

Marissa: I started playing soccer when I was three years old. I had a passion for track and field through elementary and high school but my parents wanted me in team sports until I was a little older. I was involved in soccer and basketball until I was 11 years old. When I got my first running blade, that's when I joined a local running group. When I was 13 I broke the Canadian record in the 100 meter sprint for my amputee classification. That's when it dawned on me that, "okay, I think I can do something with this." But I still didn't know what opportunities I would have in Paralympic sport until I saw some coverage of the Paralympic Games in London in 2012 on TV. I was only ever associated with able-bodied sports, always in a space with able-bodied kids. It wasn't until I went to my first para meet that I was with a group of people who were like me. Before that I was always the only kid with a disability on the team. My first para event expanded my horizons to a whole other world that I never had been exposed to.



Photo courtesy Athletics Canada

PO: *Being that only kid on the team with a disability, how did your disability impact your life?*

Marissa: Being a congenital amputee, it's all I've ever known. But I'm confident in saying that it has influenced my life for the better. My difference has opened so many doors for me that otherwise I wouldn't have experienced. The biggest thing is that it has given me a platform to speak about things that I think are important. I hope I can be a role model for kids, not just for kids with disabilities but all kids... kids who don't have role models who look like them. I hope I can influence others by what I'm doing and accomplishing.

PO: *Where does that motivation to help others come from?*

Marissa: I don't see my prosthetic leg as being a negative body image thing. I've been very lucky to be around people all my life who never looked at me differently, and that's why I feel good about myself. My whole life I've always had a determined attitude to show people what I can do. But at the same time, not caring what other people think. I do things I want to do unapologetically. My parents have always been very encouraging, and always pushed and motivated me to keep moving forward despite challenges and hurdles. They taught me to work hard, especially when things aren't going my way. And they always stressed the

importance of being grateful and to appreciate what you have.

PO: *Frustrations?*

Marissa: Finding shoes. Finding shoes that fit my prosthetic foot properly. In grade 9, I was the only girl at the dance wearing flats because I didn't have a high-heel prosthesis at the time. I do now. I am an Ossur Athlete, meaning that I receive product from them. It's expensive technology and I'm really fortunate to have them as a sponsor. My prosthetic blade, the Cheetah Xtreme, doesn't define who I am, or make me who I am, but it allows

me to compete at the highest level and to strive for better and faster every day. But like with any of my prosthetic legs, when the technology isn't working at its best, it's one of the biggest inconveniences of being an amputee. Another frustration is public perceptions sometimes... when I'm looked at differently than an able-bodied athlete. Yes, I happen to have an extra challenge to overcome, but I am an athlete.

PO: *What's next?*

Marissa: Now is my time to compete. I'm focusing my next years on track full-time. I want to compete until 2028. At the same time I'd like to get into public speaking and grow my platform. Then journalism and broadcasting. I'd love to work for CBC. That would be a great platform.

PO: *Just for fun, any amputee life hacks to share?*

Marissa: I love wearing sandals. But without toes to grip a sandal, my mom and I came up with a hack for that... double-sided Velcro on the bottom of my foot and on the top of the sandal. It works really well!

