



DREAM WEAVER

Photo courtesy of Rio Kanda Kovac

Paralympics to Media Platforms

Rio Kanda Kovac

has BIG Plans

By Jeff Tiessen

There are some sports that are just not for everyone. These are generally the ones that the more conservative folk shake their head at and question “who would want to do that?” But it’s those same sports for which a small faction of athletes share a passion as unique as the sport itself. Enter Wheelchair Rugby.

It’s tough. It’s rough. It’s loud. It’s fast-paced. And it’s a bit shocking for the uninitiated spectator. It’s all of that, plus the social environment and the camaraderie with his teammates that Rio Kanda Kovac loves about his sport.

At only 19 years old Rio, a recent high school graduate, is remarkably young to be representing Team Canada on the wheelchair rugby team. “Most of the players are in their mid 30s or even 40s,” Rio explains, “but we are trying to build a younger team. I’m a pretty big hitter... that’s my job to try and knock people over. That’s part of the game.”

For the unaware, wheelchair rugby is a tenacious game. A full-contact court sport, it was invented in the 1970s in Winnipeg by a small group of athletes with quadriplegia who were looking for an alternative to wheelchair basketball. They wanted a sport that would allow players with reduced arm and hand

function to participate equally. The sport they created, now known as wheelchair rugby, was originally called Murderball.

Born in Canada, living in Toronto, Rio lived in Japan at a young age where he underwent surgery related to his CMT (Marie Charcot Tooth disease) and resided in Japan with his dad for a couple years as a young teen. That’s when he discovered wheelchair rugby and got interested in the sport. Ironically, the game he watched on TV that inspired him was being played in Canada.

It was Canada against Argentina broadcasting from the 2015 Pan American Games in Toronto. “Sitting and watching,” Rio shares, “it was the first time I felt like ‘Hey, I could play this. I could do that.’” Rio also shares that growing up he couldn’t play sports like hockey and soccer. “I was always on the sidelines. This [rugby] was it. I knew I needed to pursue it.”

Rio didn’t delay. He started training immediately and within a year, at 13, he was playing wheelchair rugby. And he hasn’t stopped playing. He played in Japan for two years before deciding to come back to Canada. His first year back he received his athlete development card and has been training and travelling with the junior national team ever since. His sights are set on representing Canada at the 2024 Summer Paralympic Games in Paris. “I absolutely want to make that team. The World Championships next year in Denmark is my first goal with me being part of the senior team.” Describing himself as determined, hard-working, enthusiastic and motivated, Rio recognizes that it took time to get to where he is now athletically, but is ready for the journey and the adventures that lie ahead.

Rio appreciates that there will be obstacles ahead, and equipment for rugby players can be one of them.

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Wheelchairs for rugby are costly. Understandably, they are custom-made and it's a very niche market. "My dad paid for my first chair and I'm really thankful because it wasn't cheap."

With a pricetag in and around \$10,000, the rough-and-tumble nature of the sport calls for a new wheelchair every two to three years. "I did a GoFundMe for my second chair, the one I currently use, and raised \$11,000 for it," he tells. "I'll need to do the same next year for my next chair. Some say it's a 'rich man's sport'," he laughs.

Rio uses his "everyday" manual wheelchair for daily mobility. His disability – CMT – is a degenerative disorder. Understanding that his hands, arms and legs will continue to weaken over time, Rio is focussed on fitness training now to combat that. "My dad has CMT too. He's been really helpful on my journey to parasport. My dad is my idol."

But outside of sport, it's important to Rio to be as active as he can be. "Outside of rugby, from a lifestyle standpoint, physical activity is essential for me. I have some mental health challenges. Wheeling around outside calms me down. It's been really important to stay active this year with everyone forced indoors."

To keep him on the move Rio uses a companion for grocery-getting and heading out with siblings and friends on bike and park paths. To save some wear and tear on his arms and shoulders, his quick-attach Companion does the wheeling for him. A zippy product from Cheelcare, the mobility device is a hand-throttle, power-driven add-on for manual wheelchairs. "It becomes part of the chair," describes Rio, "but there are times that I don't use it when I want some extra cardio exercise."

That extra cardio comes in many different forms for Rio as well. He enjoys going out for a wheel on the road, swimming, sailing in the harbour, and kayaking too. "With kayaking, because my CMT affects my hand strength which makes it hard

Photo courtesy of Cheelcare

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to hold stuff, and sailing too, I've had to figure things out as I go. I come up with adaptations and solutions to make it work. The world is not going to change for me so I need to figure it out!

“But most importantly I do what I love to do. It was tough for me growing up with a disability in an able-bodied world thinking that there just wasn't a lot out there for me. A really big part of childhood is playing sports and I didn't have that. It was really hard. My mom put me in every possible sport, even golf and soccer... even though the golf clubs were flying out of my hands, I gave it a shot. But I finally found it in rugby. I tell others: 'Be Patient. You'll find it too'.”

With high school behind him now, Rio is scripting his To-Do List for the

next phase of his life. Of course, becoming a Paralympic rugby player tops that list. Taking a gap year to work part-time with Cheelcare makes the list. And so does applying to the University of Arizona and playing in the school's wheelchair rugby program with a scholarship. There's his interest in media too – directing short animation films. Add music production to that. Doing some physiotherapy to improve his walking is listed. He wants to try a winter parasport. And for the big picture item: “I want to create a fun media fitness or athletic platform for kids who have a disability to help them be active and healthy like me. That's the dream one day.”

For more on wheelchair rugby in Ontario, visit www.onpara.ca.

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