

The Future of the Paralympics



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Amputee athlete aims for Olympics

Three years ago Oscar Pistorius had never stepped onto a track, let alone run a race.

Today he is an athletics sensation - holder of world records in the 100m, 200m and 400m events. His coach, Ampie Louw, says Oscar is "a natural champion - born that way". The 20-year-old South African is one of a handful of runners around the globe who could make the Olympic qualifying time. He is less than a second away. But Oscar's Olympic bid is like no other - he is a double amputee.

'Blade runner'

At birth he was missing bones below the knee. After his legs were removed, at the age of one, he learnt to walk on prosthetics, and he believes this pushed him to excel. He has done everything from quad biking to water skiing. He took up athletics as rehabilitation for a rugby injury.

On the track, they call him 'blade runner' - thanks to his carbon fibre prosthetics, custom-made in Iceland. He and his blades, called Cheetahs, have run into sporting history, and into controversy. He has been dogged by claims that the blades give him an extra long stride - something he denies.

The manufacturers, Ossur, say the blades are "passive devices", which lag way behind what biological legs can do. They insist the Cheetahs are not performance-enhancing, but simply give amputee athletes a fighting chance.

Winning ingredient

Oscar says he is the winning ingredient, not the blades. He is outrunning single amputees using the Cheetahs. "I train harder than any of the other guys do," he says. "I put in more hours. I eat better. I sleep better. I rest better and, overall, I am more diligent." He has just shown what he can do against able-bodied athletes. In South Africa's National Championships in Durban last month, he came in second. "I don't see myself as disabled, and I think it's the guy that wants to win the hardest that's gets it," he explains. Oscar's next challenge is the Visa Paralympic World Cup in Manchester next month, but he is looking ahead to Beijing in 2008.

Olympic hopes

One of Britain's sporting heroes, former world record holder Colin Jackson, says he should be given the chance. "I think it's a great idea, if he makes it as the first paralympian," he told BBC News.

"He's one of these guys who is a genuine athlete. And he's young enough to not only make 2008, but to compete also in 2012, which would be really sensational."

But the world body governing athletics, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), has already moved to block him from the Olympics, with a new ruling banning "technical aids".



Pistorius made his international debut at the 2004 Paralympics



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Oscar Pistorius

Senior officials have "suspicions" about his performance on the Cheetahs. Oscar says his critics are only looking at the advantages of the blades - "if there are any" - and not the disadvantages.

"There's never been a disabled athlete running in the Olympics," he says. "There's a fear of change."

Oscar believes some people just do not like the competition, but he says he will keep chasing his dream.



Sprint comparisons

400m times (in seconds):

46.56 - Pistorius world record

47.80 - 1928 Olympic gold

44.00 - 2004 Olympic gold

200m times (in seconds):

21.58 - Pistorius world record

22.00 - 1920 Olympic gold

19.79 - 2004 Olympic gold

100m times (in seconds):

10.91 - Pistorius world record

11.20 - 1906 Olympic gold

9.85 - 2004 Olympic gold

So just how good is Oscar Pistorius?

What do you think his times will be in Beijing?