

Define Wellness and Physical Therapy inc.

# MY PARALYMPIC GAMES EXPERIENCE



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The 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games finished in the summer of 2021, having been delayed by the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic. These Games were, in some ways, shadows of Games past: very few spectators were allowed at venues, support staff was reduced, athletes testing positive for COVID-19 had to quarantine – sometimes resulting in being unable to compete in those events they had trained 5 years for.

I was fortunate enough to have been part of the support staff as a soigneur for the U.S. Paracycling Team during the 2012 London and 2016 Rio de Janeiro Paralympic Games. Although a Paralympic Games event covered nearly 2 weeks of competition, the 3 weeks (minimum) prior to the Games included specific preparation and training for nearly the entire team of athletes and staff. The support staff included team leads/coordinators, coaches, mechanics, soigneurs, sports nutritionist, and sports psychologist. The athletes rode different types of bikes based on the athlete's functionality: standard upright 2-wheel bicycles, tandems, luge-like handcycles, "kneeler" handcycles, and adult-sized tricycles. All types competed in the Road and Time Trial races, only the upright and tandem bikes competed in Track racing.

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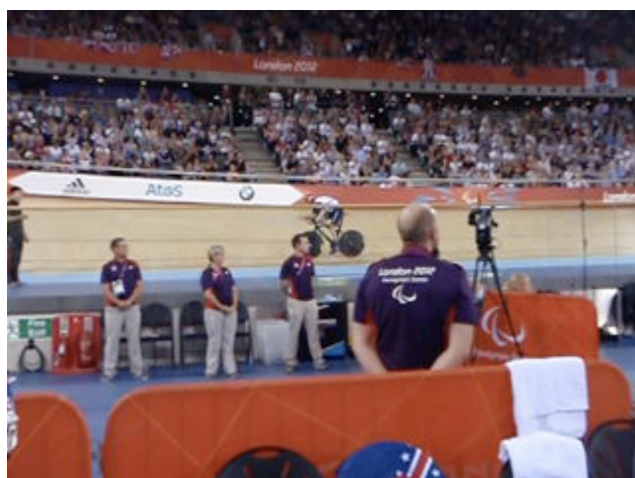
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By having the entire team of athletes and staff working together so closely leading in to the Games, we became such a well-oiled machine that we were able to anticipate the needs of each athlete and his/her equipment, often communicating with nothing more than a glance - even if that glance was from across the opposite side of the “pits” of the



velodrome during Track racing competitions. The support team’s purpose was to make riders’ lives easier so they could stay focused on competing in the race rather than dealing with details surrounding it.

There are so many amazing memories I have from these Games, far too many to recount here. But, there are three memories that strongly stand out in my mind. The first was at the 2012 London Games during the Track cycling competitions held at the velodrome (nicknamed the “Pringle” for its resemblance to Pringle’s potato chips!). The “pit” of the velodrome is where each country had an area set up for their athletes to warm up/cool down, have their bikes adjusted by the mechanics, and receive any last minute bodywork or apparel/equipment adjustments by the soigneurs. The track surrounds the pit and the spectator seating surrounds the track.



As I was standing near the middle of the pit, there was a cyclist from Great Britain (the home team) racing against another rider. Each rider started at opposite sides of the track. As the race began, the crowd went wild, screaming and shouting, clanging their cowbells for the GB rider. As I stood in the middle of the pit, I closed my eyes. I could tell where the GB rider was based on the sound of the crowd...it was like a solid wave of sound travelling around the velodrome, loudest where

the rider was at the time. It was the equivalent of watching a crowd do “the wave” but all in sound that could be felt to the very core of my being! Simply amazing!

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The second strong memory was at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games on the day of the Time Trial races. For the Rio Games, Team USA had 24 paracyclists and 13 supporting staff members; I was one of four soigneurs. The Time Trial race is a race against the clock where each cyclist starts individually about one minute apart with a few extra minutes between each racing category. All 24 US paracyclists competed that day. Time Trial day was a 20 hour day for me, easily the longest day of the trip!



The day started before dawn, traveling from the Olympic village to the Road race venue. We had queued most of our equipment a couple days earlier at a hotel close to the start line. We scoped out and claimed an area to use as our “pit” for the day that was between the hotel and the start line. Myself and two other soigneurs loaded hotel baggage carts with support gear and made at least a half dozen trips each from hotel to pit area...stopping only for some amazing Brazilian espresso to refill our much needed caffeine levels. The bikes were then brought out and arranged by race order. Soon after dawn, the athletes began arriving. The first race of the day began at 8am, while it was still cool-ish. Then began the ritual repeated with EACH of the 24 athletes: athlete warm-up, any last minute bodywork (stretching, taping, etc.), the race number was pinned on, the athlete was escorted to the start line and provided water and shade from

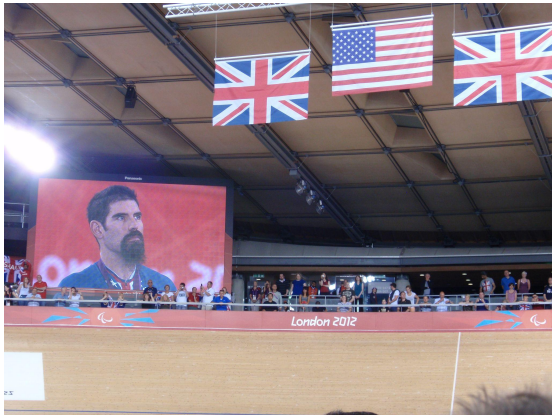


an umbrella as needed, a soigneur would “catch” the athlete at the finish by covering them with wet towels to start the cool-down process, the athlete was guided to an area where a cool-down spin happened, a quick flush was provided before sending the athlete back to the Olympic village. This ritual was shared among the three soigneurs,

weaving tasks with seamless hand-offs of an athlete from one soigneur to the next while allowing the athlete to keep their mind-set in “the zone”.

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As racing came to a close, we began tearing down and packing up our pit. It felt like we were watching a movie in reverse, returning all the gear back to the hotel, repeating the luggage cart treks and espresso refills. We boarded the bus back to the village, grabbed a quick dinner at the 24 hour dining hall, and provided the last few flushes for athletes that hadn't already received them. It was all we could do to stave off pure exhaustion as we tumbled into our beds for the night. Team USA brought home 9 medals that day: 1 gold, 6 silver, and 2 bronze.



The final memory I'd like to share happened at both the 2012 and 2016 Games. For every award ceremony performed for each competition, the flags from the countries of the first, second, and third place finishers are raised while the national anthem for the first place finisher is played. When my own national anthem, *The Star Spangled Banner*, played for my paracyclists on the world stage, the feeling of intense pride was nearly overwhelming! I understood why it was that we often see

athletes shed a few tears while on the podium. It was the culmination of years of intense training and dedication on the part of the athlete, but also a nod to a job well done by all their support staff. I'm so glad to have been a part of these athletes' journeys, helping to ensure that their bodies were working in top form to be able to compete at their very best.

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