

The Row to Paris 2024

IN THIS SPORTS ARTICLE, I INTERVIEW WORLD-CLASS PARA-ROWER KATIE O'BRIEN AND SHE TELLS ME THE MENTAL CHALLENGES SHE'S FACED WITH SURGERIES, INJURIES AND THE LONG ROAD TO THE 2024 PARALYMPICS.

Rowing. Upon thinking of that word, bloody, blistered hands, burning muscles and lungs on fire come to mind. It is a sport that requires athletes to have elite physical condition but also a certain intellect so they can understand and perform with the detailed technique required to power the boat through the water. Done correctly, rowing appears elegant and effortless to onlookers, or those who have never stepped foot inside a shell (rowing boat), but in that boat all hell breaks loose.

Rowing is an ancient, time-honoured sport, with the first representation of a rowing boat dating back to 5,800 B.C. The earliest regatta (a rowing race) is thought to have been in Venice in 1274, but the regattas we know today originated in 1829 when the Universities Oxford and Cambridge famously went head to head on the River Thames. Rowing became an Olympic sport in 1896, with the women's event being introduced in 1976. Para-rowing was first competed in in the Paralympics in 2008. It is four years later, during the 2012 Paralympics, that our story begins.

Upon logging into that Zoom call, with rain spattering against my bedroom window, I am greeted with a wide, contagious smile that seems to reach across the cyber-vortex of our Zoom call and brighten up the dull room I'm sitting in. It is immediately clear to me that Katie O'Brien is not only a world class athlete but also a bubbly, positive character. Katie is 26 years old and was born with spina bifida, so she has to wear a brace on her leg. However, this has hardly stopped her from becoming one of Ireland's greatest rowers and on the way to qualifying for the 2024 Paralympics in Paris.

After a friendly introduction, Katie tells me about the beginning of her rowing journey. "I watched the Paralympics in 2012," Katie recalls, "and I was like 'Jeez that's something I'd love to do'." Katie and her Dad then sent an email to Paralympics Ireland and they asked her to an event where aspiring-athletes could try all the different sports in the Paralympics. Katie first went to the horse-riding booth, but when she was told they only had dressage she felt discouraged and began to wander around the other booths until she stopped at the rowing showcase— a man with an erg (rowing machine). She took a few strokes on the erg and the man in charge of the booth was astonished. "The guy was like, 'Wait, do that again?'," Katie recalls. "So I pulled a few more strokes and he was like, 'Wait, do that again?'" A month later Katie was asked to a training camp and the rest is history.

Though Katie had found her passion in rowing, she was constantly in and out with surgeries and has suffered a few injuries throughout her sports career. As many athletes know, taking time off training because of an injury can be very mentally challenging, and Katie is no exception to this experience. She tells me about the time she found out she was going to the 2019 World Championships so she increased her training volume but ended up injuring her shoulder. "That was definitely really tough, because I was coming up to one of the biggest competitions of my entire life and I was probably doing the least amount of training I had done in a long time," Katie admits. A positive outlook and focusing on what you can do while injured, instead of what you can't, helped Katie battle through this injury.

Speaking of challenges, when I asked Katie what the main challenge she has faced is, she told me the story of trying to qualify for the World Champions and the Paralympics. Chances are, if you're a serious rower, your dream is to go to the World Championships or the Olympics/Paralympics, both if you're lucky. Katie, like many others, had this dream, but for her it was near impossible to achieve— both of these events require para-rowers to row a double scull, but Katie was a single-sculler who couldn't find a doubles partner.

Because of this, Katie took a break from rowing for two years, but came back in 2019 when they introduced the single to the World Championships. Unfortunately one obstacle remained: The Paralympics still required para-rowers to row in a double, and Katie still didn't have a partner. "At the end of the day, I knew I was as good as these girls who were going to the Paralympics and who were getting medals at the Paralympics, but I still couldn't go," Katie says. Luckily Katie now has a doubles partner, Stephen, and they are training together for the Paralympic Qualifications just around the corner... If they can place in the top eight boats at the Worlds this summer, they will qualify for the 2024 Paralympics!

As our interview comes to a close, I ask Katie if there's anything else she'd like to tell me, or anyone who may be reading this article. Her final message is touching, and an accurate reflection of the considerate and inspiring person I have interviewed. "Just be really kind to everybody," she says. "Because I'm a para-athlete, my difference is on the outside, but some people's is on the inside, whether they'd be struggling mentally or with anxiety or ADHD or dyslexia or whatever. Everybody has a challenge, and in some ways I'm lucky mine is on the outside and it's not something I have to deal with internally. So that'd be my last message."

As the interview concludes and my screen blackens with the end of the Zoom call, I feel an overwhelming sense of honour to have been able to talk with this athlete who embodies the positive and kind, but also the determined and gritty attitude present in only the best sporting legends. An inspiration to us all, we'll look forward to finally seeing Katie O'Brien take to the water in Paris 2024!