

Relay a challenge for Paralympian

BY DAN OLSON, COQUITLAM NOW SPORTS EDITOR AUGUST 29, 2012



In tandem: Paralympian Dustin Walsh, right, and new guide runner Dylan Williamson go through final preparations for the 2012 Paralympic Games in London.

Photograph by: Troy Landreville , BURNABY NOW

It's not just 400 metres of prime time for New Westminster's Dustin Walsh next week at the Paralympic Games in London.

This time, it's 500 - as in the 400m and the 4x100m relay - as the veteran competitor adds another event to his portfolio.

The 29-year-old sprinter signed up for the relay race understanding that the difference between his usual 400m event and the relay is as basic as the handing of a baton.

Timing is everything.

Being in sync for a split second is the only difference for Walsh, Langley's Braedon Dolfo, Jon Dunkerley and Brandon King.

But when you consider that all four are blind athletes who run side-by-side with guide runners, and that they've spent much of the past year split across Canada, you can imagine the challenge.

"It's a new event for us. It's different but I feel strongly about medaling," said Walsh, who grew up in Coquitlam but recently moved to New Westminster. "There are no guarantees going in that you land on the podium."

The foursome has had a few opportunities to rehearse their dash, but those rare opportunities have been positive.

Walsh, with three Paralympics under his belt, brings the most experience. But he's new to the relay, unlike the other three. The foursome have had to work in two tandems - with Dunkerley and King based in Ontario, and Walsh and Dolfo here in B.C.

He will also break in a new running guide, as Dylan Williamson takes over from his Beijing partner Steve Walters, who was sidelined after a spring injury.

"We sort of recruited Dylan a year ago to follow us, and he's proven to be a terrific teammate... He carries quite a bit of pressure in the relay, and it's his job to take the baton, to keep up."

At heart a sprinter, Walsh has embraced his new event with the same dedication that has taken him to multiple international competitions.

He isn't looking at the relay - which goes Sept. 5, a day before his 400m race - as a tuneup for the other. As a runner, he has taken this new challenge with one goal, said national team coach Laurier Primeau of Burnaby.

"For Dusty, he's not new to these (Paralympics), this is not his first time around the track," said Primeau. "They all came in with a mindset that this event was something they wanted to win."

Walsh, who lost his eyesight at birth due to glaucoma, posted his best result at the 2004 Athens Games, where he finished fifth in the T11 400m race. In Beijing, an 11th-place result left him disappointed.

"I had a fairly disappointing competition in Beijing, losing out in the heats and battling an injury. It was definitely disappointing not to have more experience on the track."

In the relay, Dolfo will hand the baton to Williamson who will put it in Walsh's hands for the final leg. Being the anchor suits the veteran runner fine.

"I'm pretty fortunate to be running anchor, really. I only have one pass (of the baton). The key is to just stay focused on what my guide is telling me.

"If we're one step early or one step late, it's a huge difference."

Primeau has had the team practise under race-like conditions, with runners on the surrounding lanes. It is impossible to emulate the actual Paralympic experience - where a crowd exceeding 30,000 is expected to create a loud, energetic buzz during the event.

"Nothing can prepare you for that crowd, the magnitude of the Paralympics is so much more than other races they've run," noted Primeau.

"Dusty is ready to go and Dylan's ready to go. For the relay, the only difference is you have to get the stick around the track faster than anyone else."

For Walsh, having a third opportunity to represent his country at the biggest competition possible is a huge honour. He plans to convert that opportunity with his best effort.

"It is very exciting. I've been training for 16 years and this is just the third time I get to do it. This is why I'm out there every day, running and training."

The Paralympic Games start today (Wednesday).

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