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# Kari Miller Goes for the Gold at the London 2012 Paralympics

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By Seánan Forbes

After 10 minutes of phone tag in the English rain trying to meet sitting volleyball player Kari Miller, who is in town for the **London 2012 Paralympics**, I spot a young woman who appears to be in her mid-20s, wearing a U.S. team logo. I ask whether she knows Kari Miller. "Know her?" she asks. She *is* Kari Miller.

Registering my surprise, she assures me again that she is indeed the 35-year-old double-amputee Paralympics star and veteran. In a way, the youthful, buoyant woman is not who I expected, yet exactly who I expected — especially when I ask how I should describe her. Miller smiles and says, "Queen of the World."

Miller's most recent surprises have been delivered to opponents as team libero, a specialized defensive player for seated volleyball at the Paralympics. Miller and the U.S. seated volleyball team are **competing for gold** on Sept. 7.



Kari Miller lost her legs in a car accident in 1999, but she is poised to win Gold with the U.S. seated volleyball team at the 2012 London Paralympics.

This year's Paralympics are a homecoming of sorts for the games, which first took place in England after World War II. Ludwig Guttmann, a German neurosurgeon, fled to England in 1939 to avoid Nazi persecution and opened the National Spinal Injuries Centre at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury. After the war, he devised polo, archery and netball as therapy for wheelchair-bound veterans.

The first games — the Stoke Mandeville Games — saw 16 former service men and women in archery competitions; they began on July 28, 1948, the same day as the London Olympics. Since then, the Paralympics have become the world's second-largest multiple-sport event. Athletes with a range of disabilities compete in the games.

Disabled. It's hard to think of a word less applicable to Miller — and it isn't one that's used. "We don't say 'enabled' or 'disabled,'" she says. "I don't play a disabled sport. I play an adaptive sport. It may be difficult for me to play a standing sport, but we adapted it so that you have the same level of difficulty that I will, sitting down. It's not easier. They just made it *able* for me to play it — so it's adapted for every player to have a good time."

She reflects, "People always say, 'I feel bad for you. You lost both legs. That's terrible. You *were* going to be an officer in the military.'" But Miller's perspective is quite different. "Yes," she says, "I was going to be an officer in the military. I'm not downgrading that ... but my job in life is to play a game I love to play every day, travel the world doing it, meet all of these great people who've been through so much — people who understand true struggles so they know that these little petty things aren't that important. That's the thing that people should understand." To those who don't, Miller says, "I feel bad for *you*."

For all her ebullience, Miller has a practical streak. She joined the military to pay for college. "I was a junior in high school," she says, and breaks into a grin. "You stay in high school, but on weekends you go and drill with your unit. It's cool."

After basic training and serving in Bosnia, Miller realized that the military wasn't just a means to an educational end. It was what she wanted to do. "The only thing about my job is that I don't want to be the one who has to carry the stuff," she says. "I wanted to tell people what to do."

I toss her words across the table: Queen of the World. Owing the phrase, Miller nods. "I wanted to use my brain, not my body." With a degree in biology, she'd proven she had a brain. "I wanted to go to officer candidate school." Her commander put in the application — and Miller was accepted. "I was celebrating," she recalls. "It was around Christmas in [Washington] DC; it was a party atmosphere — when a drunk driver ran into the back of us. We'd left the club and were going to IHOP. That's how I ended up losing both legs. That was '99."

She was in her early 20s when her life changed. That's a hard time to rewire your body, brain and emotions. Staring into the past, Miller says, "You wonder about dating. I wasn't married. You think, 'Oh, man, no one's going to want me.'"

Before the accident, she says, "All my life, I was a runner, so I had great legs. I was kind of hot." She pulls out her phone and shows me a photo. A tiny Kari Miller, barely 20, grins up at the lens. She's wearing a bikini, and her runner's legs, solid and toned, stretch out forever. This young woman knows what she has and she's flaunting it. Who wouldn't?

"Being a woman, to begin with, we tend to be insecure or harsh on ourselves. And then you look at that and ... " for just an instant, Miller relives it. Sports, friends and venturing out on dates helped her to regain perspective, but it took time. There is a man in her life; Miller describes him as "an awesome guy."

That's now. Back in 1999, Miller woke in the hospital. Her mother was in the room. "My mom's really, really strong. She's a homicide detective in DC. She's also undercover — and she's funny as heck." It's becoming clear where Miller gets her roots. "She didn't look like herself. She looked scared ... It made me nervous. She said, 'Do you know what happened?'"

Miller's immediate response was, "At least now I can be as tall as I want to be." Everybody burst out laughing, Miller says, "Because I don't like being short. My whole life, I wanted to be taller." She used to be 5-foot-4; now she's 5-5 with prosthetic legs.

From that moment, it was all about the practical. "What do we do next? How do we get you here? How do we get you there?" By the time Miller was in rehab, her mother was thinking in terms of wheelchair basketball. Miller was up for it: "I played basketball all my life."

"I tried wheelchair basketball, even though I was thinking it's not for me. It's for people in wheelchairs — but it's not. I take the ball. I go to dribble it. I go to shoot it and the ball goes this high." Miller's hand describes a pathetic arc. "This little girl comes, takes the ball, dribbles it, and makes a scoop shot right in front of me." That was it. "I'm going to learn this game and I'm going to come back just so I can make this kid cry," recalls Miller. "I ended up being asked to play for the University of Illinois."

Then she was invited to try out for the U.S. Paralympic basketball team. But Miller lost out to woman who was 6-foot-4. Miller was out of basketball, but she wasn't done with sports. "One of the girls said, 'Why don't you try volleyball?' I was like ... " Miller's voice takes on the delicately offended tone of a debutante being offered a street-cart frankfurter, "No."

Miller expounds on her initial misconceptions. "Basketball girls and volleyball girls are two different things," she says. "When I play basketball, we have dirt across our faces. We just don't care. We're out there to play. Volleyball, they put on their makeup, do their hair. They have these little shorts."

So when she refused, Miller meant, "I'm not wearing spandex. I'm not playing."

An invitation to play in Atlanta, where Miller had never been, tempted her to try it, though. Another player hit the volleyball at Miller — fast as Halley's comet: "Fire was shooting out of it." Miller thought, "This sport is a beast!" She was in love.

She still is. "I love being here. I love being able to represent." While as a defensive player, Miller doesn't score points, she makes sure that the other side doesn't stand much of a chance. That strategic thinking she wanted to use as an officer — and the tactical skill she acquired in chess club — are in play now. "Sometimes you need to give up something in order to gain something else," she says.

Miller has worked very hard to get where she is. "If there is such a thing as a next life, I want to come back as a single below-knee amputee. My mother laughs, 'You don't want to come back normal?' No! 'Cause you guys miss out on everything."

She has an eye on a Ph.D. in physical therapy. "I would love to work with injured adults and servicemen through their rehab, using sports." She already helps people, and sports play a key role in that. Later this year, she'll be stepping close to a different limelight. "I'm going to be the [sitting] volleyball coach for the Warrior Games — which is the military Paralympic Games."

Apart from volleyball, what's bringing her joy? A pensive look softens Miller's gaze and her voice slows. "My mom's about to retire. Her seeing that I am truly OK. I know she just wants to know that I would be ... and the fact that people are starting to understand how these sports are, that it's not just, 'Oh, aren't they cute, that they're trying?' The recognition of it is making me happy, as well."

In 2012, for the first time ever, the Paralympic games have sold out. While the Paralympics have strong recognition in London, if you want to watch something other than synopses and updates in the U.S. and Canada, your only chance is watching the games online at the **International Paralympic Committee website** or watch them streaming **here**.

Photo credit: Dylan Coulter