

Oscar Pistorius : Overcoming his disability

แอน มหาคีตะ*

Ann Mahakeeta *

Department of Physical Education

Arguably one of the most well-known athletes in the world, Oscar Pistorius has not allowed his physical disability to get in the way of his sporting dreams. The South African grew up in an environment where he was treated like any other person, even though he had lost both his legs at just 11 months old due to a congenital condition. His mentality and strive to be an equal propelled Pistorius into the world of sports, specifically disability sports initially. His domination of that scene prompted him to aim higher, and the dream of competing at the Olympic Games fueled Pistorius for many years. From his failed attempt at qualification for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games to becoming the first amputee to run at the London 2012 Olympic Games, Pistorius has proven himself to be more than an equal among able-bodied men. His athletic prowess and commercial endorsements are testaments to that. But his journey to athletic stardom was far from a fairy tale, with controversies, such as his dispute over the International Association of Athletics Federations ban on his running prosthetics, littering his career. But perhaps it is no less than what the world should expect of Pistorius, or any other world-class athlete. Our embracement of Pistorius the athlete, as well as the man, means that he has blinded us from his disability. That is Pistorius' greatest victory.

Introduction

This paper is about how Oscar Pistorius, a double amputee runner, has established himself as an athlete, and not just a disabled person who participates in sports. His participation at the London 2012 Olympic Games captured the attention of the world. Although Pistorius is not the first disabled athlete to grace the Olympics, he is without doubt the most famous. But it is not just his spirit, athletic prowess and commercial success that make him stand out from the others. It is the publicity he generates that makes him one of the most high-profile athletes in the world. That publicity stems not just from his sporting achievements but the controversies he created as well. Because of his fame, disability sport gets the attention and recognition that it deserves. Pistorius' legacy is that he made the world see him as a professional athlete, with his share of qualities and flaws, and not just as an inspirational beacon of hope for people with disability.

*

Department of Physical Education

Background

Oscar Pistorius was born on November 22, 1986 in Johannesburg, South Africa. His legs had to be amputated below the knees when he was 11 months old because of a congenital condition that left him with no fibula in both limbs (McHugh, 2007). The energetic boy got his first pair of prosthetics when he was 17 months old and remained active ever since. At 13, Pistorius went to Pretoria High School for Boys, a boarding school. He never felt different from the rest of his schoolmates because he had no legs. The feeling was mutual as Pistorius was subjected to the same treatment, punishment and even bullying like all the other boys. The boy channeled his boundless energy through the school's competitive sporting environment, participating in cricket, water polo, rugby and tennis. He became so good at sports that he represented the school in rugby, and competed in water polo and tennis at the provincial level.

Sports beginnings

Pistorius picked up running in 2003 when he was undergoing rehabilitation from a serious knee injury suffered while playing rugby. He became so good at running that his coaches encouraged him to compete at the South African disabled championships in 2004. He took part in the 400m race and his timing ranked him as one of the top ten runners in South Africa. On the strength of that performance, Pistorius was selected to represent South Africa at the Athens 2004 Paralympic Games, the equivalent of the Olympic Games for athletes with disability. He finished third in the 100m T44 (classification code) category and won the 200m (T44) (BBC, 2008). His sterling rise to prominence in athletics continued in the following years. In 2005, Pistorius participated in his first able-bodied competition, the South African Championships. He finished 6th in the 400m but his timing of 47.34secs set a new disability sport world record. At the Paralympic World Cup that same year, he won gold in the 100m and 200m races. He won gold again in the 100m, 200m and 400m races the following year at the Paralympic Athletics Championships.

After proving almost all-conquering in disability sports, the South African began to compete with able-bodied runners. In 2007, Pistorius ran in a series of events for able-bodied athletes, at Rome's Golden Gala and at the Norwich Union British Grand Prix. By then, Pistorius had set his sights on competing at the biggest sporting stage, the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.

He told WIRED magazine in March 2007: "I have full respect for the Paralympics, but I tell people this all the time: You'll never progress if your mind is on your disability." (McHugh, 2007) His ambition of seeing himself as an equal to other runners is best described by his own words at the Paralympic Games in Athens: "I'm not disabled, I just don't have any legs," (Davies, 2011)

Crossing the divide: Making the Olympic journey

The IAAF ban

Ironically, the biggest obstacle that stood between Pistorius and the Olympic Games was not his disability or his performance, but the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF). In March 2007, the international governing body for athletics changed its competition rules to ban the use of “any technical device that incorporates springs, wheels or any other element that provides a user with an advantage over another athlete not using such a device” (IAAF, 2007). The South African wears the Flex-Foot Cheetahs, a pair of running prosthetics made by Ossur, a company from Iceland. This new rule by IAAF would rule out Pistorius from the Olympic Games before he had even made any attempts to qualify. To substantiate the ban, the IAAF monitored Pistorius’ track performances in the same year and invited him to take part in a series of tests in Germany. The tests concluded that Pistorius’ limbs used 25 per cent less energy than able-bodied runners going at the same speed, and that overall, his body expended less energy than runners without prosthetics (BBC, 2008). The findings ended Pistorius’ hopes of running at the Olympics, as well as any other events under the jurisdiction of the IAAF.

Ban overturned

Pistorius appealed against IAAF’s decision at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne, Switzerland. The CAS honoured the appeal and revoked the findings of IAAF, saying that the IAAF had not proved that Pistorius had contravened competition rules with the use of his prosthetics (BBC, 2008). Instead of having an advantage, Ampie Louw, Pistorius’ coach, illustrated the difficulties that his athlete faces while running with prosthetics. According to Louw, Pistorius needs about 30m to gain his rhythm. His knees do not flex as readily, limiting his power output. His grip can be unsure in the rain. And when he runs into a headwind or grows fatigued, he must fight rotational forces that turn his prosthetic devices sideways (Longman, 2007). With the ban overturned, all Pistorius needed to do was to qualify for the Olympics.

Failed qualification

In July 2008, Pistorius clocked 47.78secs in the 400m at the Notturna International in Milan, well short of the Olympic “A” qualifying mark of 45.55secs. He went closer on his second attempt in Rome, clocking 46.62secs. His last failed attempt was in Lucerne. Despite attaining a personal best of 46.25secs, his Olympic dream was dashed (BBC, 2008). The South African displayed his tenacity and ambition to be seen as an equal, when he replied to the possibility of being offered a wildcard to compete at Beijing: “I do not believe that I would accept. If I have to take part in the Beijing Games I should do it because I qualified.”

Pistorius compensated for his failed qualification for the Olympics by dominating the track at the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games. He won a hat-trick of gold medals in the 100m, 200m and 400m, setting Paralympic records for the 100m and 200m, and a world record for the 400m (Peng, 2008).

Aiming for London

The South African continued to do well in disability sports in 2011. But the performance that he craved for came in July that year at the 19th Internazionale di Atletica Sports Solidarity Meeting in Lignano, Italy. Pistorius ran a personal best of 45.07secs in the 400m, attaining the Olympic “A” qualifying mark (Davies, 2011). A year later, the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee endorsed Pistorius’ participation at the London Olympic Games for the 400m and the 4x400m relay.

London 2012 Olympic Games

In London, Pistorius became the first amputee runner to compete at the Olympic Games. He qualified for the semi-final of the 400m but finished last. The 4x400m relay team, which he was a part of, finished second last in the final but achieved their season best time of 3min 3.46secs (Klemko, 2012).

More controversy

The South African returned to a familiar hunting ground, the Paralympics, about a month after his debut at the Olympic Games. Although Pistorius still turned in podium performances, he fell short of the lofty standards he set in Beijing four years ago. He won gold as part of the 4x100m relay team but could finish only fourth in the 100m. He redeemed himself partially by winning gold in the 400m, clocking 46.68secs, more than three seconds faster than the rest of the field (ESPN, 2012). But Pistorius’ London exploits were marred by his outburst after the 200m final. He finished second behind Brazilian Alan Oliveira and complained that Oliveira’s unusually long running blades gave him an unfair advantage. Pistorius admitted later that he regretted the timing of his outburst but not the content of it (Associated Press, 2012).

Paralympic sport is truly elite

For all of Pistorius’ successes and controversies, there is no doubt he is the most high-profile athlete with disability in the world. His story went beyond the familiar yarn associated with disability sports: meeting adversity, overcoming adversity and brave participation in sports. Pistorius did all that but he went much further. He set world records in disability sport, led the way for disabled athletes to compete in able-bodied events, and raked in lucrative commercial endorsements of about US\$1 million (31 million THB) a year. He fought the IAAF and other doubters. He stirred controversy with his

running prosthetics and with his complaint about another competitor's running blades. The rivalries, the intensity, the controversies prove that disability sport have come of age in terms of value and appeal. Nobody fights over something that has no value. Pistorius, with his fame and appeal, has pulled the Paralympics into mainstream consciousness and helped it emerge slightly from the shadow of the Olympics. He summed up the growing appeal of disability sport after his triumph at the 400m final in London, the last track race of the Paralympics:

“This has been the most phenomenally successful Olympic and Paralympic Games and I think the world is finally seeing that Paralympic sport is truly elite.” (Official London 2012 website, 2012)

Bibliography

- Official London 2012 website. (2012, September 9). **Official London 2012 website**. Retrieved September 9, 2012, from <http://www.london2012.com/paralympics/news/articles/pistorius-storms-400m-gold.html>. (online)
- Associated Press. (2012, September 4). **The Washington Post**. Retrieved September 8, 2012, from The Washington Post: www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/oscar-pistorius-loses-200-paralympic-in-stunning-upset-then-complains-about-winners-blades/2012/09/02/3410dd36-f565-11e1-863c-fe85c95ce4ed_story.html. (online)
- BBC. (2008, January 14). **BBC**. Retrieved September 5, 2012, from BBC: news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/olympics/athletics/7141302.stm.
- BBC. (2008, May 16). **BBC**. Retrieved September 5, 2012, from BBC: news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/olympics/athletics/7243481.stm
- BBC. (2008, July 18). **BBC**. Retrieved August 18, 2012, from BBC: news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/olympics/athletics/7510774.stm
- Davies, G. A. (2011, August 19). **The Telegraph**. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from The Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/8708389/Built-for-speed-interview-with-Oscar-Pistorius.html>. (online)
- ESPN. (2012, September 8). **ESPN**. Retrieved September 9, 2012, from ESPN: <http://www.espn.co.uk/london-olympics-2012/sport/story/169258.html>. (online)
- IAAF. (2007, March 26). **IAAF**. Retrieved September 5, 2012, from IAAF: <http://www.iaaf.org/news/Kind=512/newsId=38127.html>. (online)

- Klemko, R. (2012, August 11). **USA Today**. Retrieved September 6, 2012, from USA Today:
<http://www.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/london/track/story/2012-08-10/4x400-relay-oscar-pistorius-south-afric/56946372/1> . (online)
- McHugh, J. (2007, March). **Wired**. Retrieved September 6, 2012, from Wired:
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/15.03/blade.html?pg=4&topic=blade&topic_set= .
(online)
- Peng, G. (2008, September 16). **Xin Hua Net**. Retrieved September 2, 2012, from Xin Hua Net:
http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-09/16/content_10043476.htm . (online)