

# THE TRADITION CONTINUES

## MEET THE CANADIAN DISABILITY HALL OF FAME 2019 INDUCTEES

*This year's Hall of Fame inductees continue a great tradition of athletic excellence, advocacy and leadership.*



### **BRIAN MACPHERSON** *Builder*

**B**rian MacPherson, CEO of Commonwealth Games Canada and previous CEO of the Canadian Paralympic Committee (2001 - 2009), says he was a “typical jock” in his youth, playing all different sports. And from an early age, he felt that his involvement in sports was helping shape his life in a positive way, both on and off the field.

This led him to want to pursue a career in the business of sport — and it's why, in 1983, he was working as an intern assigned to the basketball competition at the World University Games in Edmonton when the Peruvian team arrived.

“Three days into the tournament, this ragtag group of foreign-looking guys walked into our basketball venue,” said MacPherson. “I happened to see them, so, I went up to them to say, ‘who are you?’ They said they were the team from Peru. And I said, ‘well, you're kind of late.’”

As it turns out, during a stopover on their flight, the coach received news his wife had been injured in an accident. He immediately jumped on a plane back to Peru, inadvertently taking all the team's funds and uniforms with him. Lacking enough money to buy plane tickets for the next leg of their journey, the players took a bus instead.

Not surprisingly, their story created headlines in the Edmonton media, and “the response of the community was incredible,” said MacPherson.

Among other things, “Air Canada gave them tickets home and the Peruvian community within Edmonton bought them new uniforms,” he added.

### **EXPERIENCE INFLUENCED HIS THINKING**

This experience would have a powerful effect on MacPherson, solidifying his view “that there was something more to sport than sport itself — that it's a conduit to individual



development, social development and community development.”

Several years later, another work experience would open his eyes to the fact that a significant segment of society does not enjoy equal access to sports equipment and facilities, much less to the funding required for participation at the elite levels of sport.

In 1988 after joining Archery Canada as a technical coordinator, MacPherson discovered that the organization fielded a national para archery team. “However, unlike the able-bodied national archery team, the para

archers had to pay for everything themselves... their competition expenses, training expenses, equipment and supplies. And I just thought to myself, ‘well, this is wrong, this is totally wrong,’” MacPherson said.

### **A PROMISE MADE**

Before moving on to his next job, he made a promise to one of the para archers, Alec Denys (now vice-president of high performance at Archery Canada), “that I would do everything in my power throughout my career to minimize, or even eliminate, the inequity between able-bodied athletes and para-athletes.”

Fortunately, adds MacPherson, “I've been lucky enough that my career took me along a path where I've been able to influence national sports programming and national sports policy.”

MacPherson's enormous contribution to enriching the lives of people with disabilities through sport is spread across the wide range of events, programs and services he has helped create or enhance, among them: the Canadian Armed Forces' Soldier On initiative, the CFPDP's Rolling Rampage on the Hill, the Canadian Paralympic Committee's Para-Equipment Fund and the Paralympic Sport Schools Program.

Not as readily apparent but just as impactful, he played a leadership role in encouraging the federal government to establish Canada's first Policy on Sport for Persons with a Disability, and he helped obtain special measures for families of kids with a disability in Canada's Child Fitness Tax Credit. Further, as head of the CPC, he delivered the 2010 Paralympic Games and substantially increasing awareness of Paralympic sport across the country.

Reflecting on his influences and motivations, MacPherson paraphrased a thought he once heard six-time Paralympic wheelchair racer Jeff Adams express in a speech — and that's he's never forgot: "We're all just temporarily able-bodied."

That's why it's essential for society to support people with disabilities and assist them in living full lives, he said.

"By the grace of God, I am not currently living with a physical disability, but that could change in a moment's notice. We all have relatives and friends who are living with a disability, and you would like to think that society, recognizes them, embraces them."

### **TRACY SCHMITT** *Achiever*

**T**racy Schmitt was born a four-way amputee, missing both hands, one arm above the elbow and her legs above knee.

But "Unstoppable Tracy," as she's known, has never let that prevent her from living the kind high-energy, adventure-filled life that most people could only imagine.

By the time Schmitt turned 20, she had climbed mountains in Nepal, captained 110-foot tall ships in the Eastern Atlantic and won a bronze medal in para-alpine skiing. She has also dived on wrecks in the St. Lawrence River, rappelled a 23-storey building and sailed competitively in both Paralympic trials and World Cup Series regattas, the latter of which are able-bodied events dominated by larger, stronger male sailors.

Moreover, Schmitt has accumulated years of experience working in senior leadership roles and consulting at companies like Air Canada and Shoppers Drug Mart. She served as manager of planning and integration for the 2015 Pan Am and Parapan Am Games in Toronto.

And when Uber was seeking to enter the Toronto market, a chance meeting with an executive of the ridesharing service led to her joining the firm's negotiating team and playing a key role in Uber receiving approval. During the negotiations, Schmitt leveraged both her business savvy and insights as a person living with disability to educate city officials to the fact that Uber Wav and Uber Assist were serv-

ices that could significantly enhance access to transportation for people in the disability community. City officials were quickly convinced and gave Uber the nod.

### **FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL**

Schmitt credits her mother with teaching her that the key to getting someone to consider a new idea or perspective — something she has had to do countless times to build support for her many adventures — is to find a way to take the person from "no" to "know."

On the morning of her first day of kindergarten, the principal told her mother that Schmitt couldn't attend the school because it didn't have the resources to support special-needs students. She wouldn't even be able to tie her own shoes, reasoned the principal.

Schmitt's mom countered by asking him to let her daughter attend class for one week as an experiment, saying if it didn't work out, she would look elsewhere, and he agreed.

"The thing is, my mom and I both knew I could tie my shoes," Schmitt said. "That day my little five-year-old brain realized that 'no' just means they don't 'know' yet. They need time to understand."

As it turned out, Schmitt was the only child in the class who could tie her shoes that first school day. Her mother had made a point of teaching her to make certain her daughter was self-sufficient, not a burden on her teacher, while the other parents hadn't yet taught their children this basic skill.

It wasn't top of mind for them, like it was for her mother, because as parents of able-bodied children, they didn't typically need to think ahead to ensure their children would be accepted in a place like a kindergarten class, Schmitt explained.

### **BORN LIMITLESS**

A gifted communicator, Schmitt keeps busy on the speaker circuit and has spoken at TedX events, sharing the stage with the likes of Jane Fonda, Dr. Phil and Michael Douglas. She has also shared her unique philosophy on life in her book, *Unstoppable You: Exceed Uncertainty, Embrace Possible, Earn Independence*.

"I like to say we are all born limitless," said Schmitt. "I was lucky enough to be born this way, so I discovered really early in life that adversity, grit, perseverance — these are all fabulous things that lead to incredible results."

Schmitt's volunteering and philanthropic contributions are too numerous to list, but to highlight a few: She has



worked as an inclusive teacher in Uganda, Jamaica and Mexico; volunteered for diversity-embracing charities in Nepal, UK and North America; and served as an Accessibility Ambassador for Rick Hanson's "I Can" days in schools across Ontario. As well, she's been involved with Canadian Tire's Jumpstart Mentorship Program, the Canadian Paralympic Committee's Changing Minds Changing Lives program and Parasport Ontario's Ready, Willing and Able program.

Schmitt's inspirational videos attract millions of views, she was named Women of Inspiration Change Agent 2019, she was a 2018 Women of Essence Global Award Nominee and she received ParaSport Ontario's Robert W. Jackson Award in 2017.

### **RICHARD "BEAR" PETER** *Athlete*

Canadian wheelchair basketball legend Richard "Bear" Peter, a member of Cowichan Tribes, was born and raised in the small community of Duncan, B.C.

At age four, his spinal cord was damaged in a school bus accident, leaving him paralyzed. But the injury didn't stop Peter from being physically active. With the help of his large family and others in his supportive local community, he learned to improvise and adapt himself to play a wide range of sports, including athletics, football, baseball and hockey.

"I was always included in all kinds of games, whether it was kick-the-can or different organized sports... I loved sports and I was willing to try just about anything," said Peter.

It wasn't until he reached the relatively advanced age of 15 that Peter discovered para basketball. A touring team visited his school and invited him to take part in a scrimmage. Long armed with good strength and coordination, he proved to be a natural talent and, soon after, was invited to train with the team in Victoria.

### **WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL CAREER**

At that time, Peter could never have imagined how far he would eventually go in the sport.

In 1992 and 1993, he participated in the BC Winter Games. A year later, he moved up to the national level.

A mainstay of the Canada men's national wheelchair basketball team for five Paralympics, he helped bring home three gold medals (2000, 2004 and 2012) and a silver (2008). He also won a world championship title in 2006, led Team BC to five consecutive national championships

and played for RSV Lahn-Dill, a professional wheelchair basketball team in Germany.

At the conclusion of the 2012 season, Peter retired from wheelchair basketball, but his career as an elite para athlete continues.

### **BACK ON THE COURT IN PARA BADMINTON**

In 2017, not long after taking up his second sport, wheelchair badminton, he was crowned Canada's national champion. The following year, he successfully defended his title. And in September 2019, he teamed up with New Brunswick's Bernard Lapointe to win bronze for Canada in men's doubles at the Parapan Am Games in Lima, Peru.

The Parapan Am Games were a qualifier for the 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo, where para badminton will debut as a Paralympic sport.

Peter now has his sights set on making the Canadian Paralympic team once again. The physical strength and wheelchair skills he developed playing basketball are assets in para badminton, and his years of international playing experience make him an important resource for his teammates and coaches.

Still, at age 47, Peter recognizes he has his work cut out for him. "It's a challenge, but I'm hoping I can qualify and get to the Games," he said.

Looking back, Peter attributes his achievements in sport, in part, to the lessons he learned from his parents. For example, he recalls his dad teaching him to pop a wheelie on his wheelchair so that he could jump a curb or descend stairs. At one point, after falling and hurting his head, he was ready to give up.

"Dad said, 'No, you've got to learn how to do that.' So I practiced some more and was able to get it down."

When you're in a wheelchair, there are always going to be barriers, "but I learned early that I can be creative and always find a way around them," he added.

Peter also remembers his mother fighting with the school board to allow him to attend the local school with his family and friends, rather than being sent to a special-needs school. The board was resistant because the school was not adapted for a child in a wheelchair. But his mother was adamant, and the board finally relented.

He said that his mother's advocacy helped him appreciate that sometimes you need to be open and vocal in order to educate others and help them understand your position.

Peter is recognized for generously contributing his time





and energy to assist youth through sport in both the disability and First Nations communities. He has received the Tom Longboat National Award for Aboriginal Male Athlete of the Year, Wheelchair Basketball Canada's Male Athlete of the Year, National Aboriginal Achievement Award, and has been inducted into the BC Sports Hall of Fame.

## **BRADLEY BOWDEN** *Athlete*

Ontario-native Bradley Bowden, 36, is one of the few Paralympic athletes to have won gold in both the summer and winter games.

He began playing para hockey at age 13 for the Kitchener Sidewinders. After joining the national team at 15, he went on to compete for Team Canada in four Winter Paralympic Games, capturing gold in Torino 2006, finishing fourth in Vancouver 2010, and winning bronze in Sochi 2014 and silver in PyeongChang 2018.

As a budding athlete, Bowden discovered wheelchair basketball even before para hockey. In 2003, he was named to the men's national wheelchair basketball team, eventually helping his squad bring home gold from the Athens 2004 Paralympic Games.

Raised in the small, rural community of Orton, Bowden was born with sacral agenesis, a rare congenital condition of spinal deformity affecting the sacrum.

### **ALL SPORTS ALL PEOPLE**

Currently, he lives in Barrie and, when off ice, works in program development at All Sports All People, a non-profit that aims to ensure that all children, regardless of ability, have access to sports.

"Our idea is that no kid should be turned away from trying out a sport or playing a sport they want to be involved in," said Bowden. "All a school or recreational organization needs to do is advertise its program and do the registration; we bring the equipment and instruction for free."

For now, All Sports All People is focusing its efforts in and around Simcoe County, but Bowden, who draws on his Paralympic skills to help coach the young athletes, believes it has the potential to expand across the province and beyond.

Bowden is passionate about ensuring that young people with disabilities have opportunities to benefit from sport — just as he did when he was growing up. His role models in this regard were his late grandparents, who were persistent in encouraging him to be physically active.

"I was kind of lazy as a kid and wanted to just stay home and play video games all the time. But my grandmother, especially, was pretty big on getting me to try new sports and other things," he said.

Gerry and Colleen Nelson adopted their grandson when he was just two years old after his biological mother, who was young and single, proved to not be up to the task of caring for him. To this day, he has never met her.

When he was older, his father, a long-time alcoholic, sought to be part of his life. But the constant drinking generated so many issues that, eventually, Bowden had to stop seeing him.

Bowden is philosophical, rather than bitter, about being abandoned as a baby by his biological parents.

"The reality is, it's challenging enough to care for a young child, much less one with a disability," he said. "When you're younger, you're asking, 'Why isn't mom around? Why doesn't dad come around?' But as you get older, you start to realize that some people just aren't suited to give a child what they need."

### **BOWDEN GRATEFUL TO DEVOTED GRANDPARENTS**

Fortunately for Bowden, his grandparents were devoted to him. He said they did all they could to give him a good life and help him pursue his dreams. His grandmother lived to see him win his two Paralympic golds before passing away in 2006, while his grandfather witnessed many more of his successes before dying in 2017.

Bowden is honoured to be celebrated for his personal achievements and contributions to para sports, but he's troubled that para sports does not always give back in equal measure.

Despite the growing support for Paralympic sports in recent years, most of the athletes "struggle financially and deal with a lot of stress and worries," he said.

For himself as he approaches the end of his playing days, the struggles are nearly over, and he's fortunate to have a transition plan in place with his employer, but he's concerned for his teammates.

"It's important for guys like myself, the veterans, to make sure people are aware of the needs of the players," said Bowden.

In particular, he hopes that more businesses will begin to see value in sponsoring Paralympic athletes and incorporating them into their marketing plans.

"My message to the corporate world is that if you're looking to invest in people, Paralympic athletes are really good investments," he said.

