



# FROM FEET TO HANDS



A LIFE-ALTERING INJURY THREATENED HER ATHLETIC CAREER - AND NEARLY ENDED HER LIFE. BUT FORMER KODIAKS SOCCER STANDOUT PAYDEN OLSEN VAIR REFUSES TO LET ANY BARRIER SLOW HER DOWN.

**P**ayden Olsen Vair (General Studies student 2018) entered the Makuhari Messe stadium in Tokyo, Japan, last August, proudly wearing Canada's colours and ready to play the biggest game of her life. She felt nerves, of course. Team Canada was about to open the round robin against archrival Brazil, then ranked fourth in the world. Every point would be critical. Medals were on the line, and an opening win against Brazil would be huge for the team's goal of reaching the podium. Even with no fans in attendance and an eerily quiet arena, Vair felt pressure, too. After all, she was wearing the maple leaf on the world's biggest stage. In her mind, she could hear the cheers from supporters staying up late to watch the team back home, and she knew thousands more would be watching the replay later in prime time.

As a serving sub for the team, Vair knew she had to be ready. Her number could be called at any moment. So, she focused on the moment. She was about to make her debut at the Paralympics as a member of Team Canada's sitting volleyball team. She wasn't thinking of the moments that came before - about being named the Kodiaks women's soccer rookie of the year at the end of her first season in 2017. She didn't think back to the summer of 2018, when she woke up in a grey hospital room and started her recovery from a life-threatening lawn mower accident. And she didn't think of the work it took to adapt to a new prosthetic right leg, to learn to walk again, and to wonder if and when she would be able to play sports again. As Vair stepped onto the court in Tokyo, she thought of nothing but representing her country and giving her all. That was the moment that mattered most.

WH Story by Jamin Heller | Photos by Heidi Peters, Jamin Heller, courtesy Canadian Paralympic Committee

## SET ONE

### A GOLDEN ROOKIE SEASON

Sports have always been central to Vair's life. A talented multi-sport athlete, she played varsity volleyball and basketball for Cardston High School – but soccer was always her true passion.

She turned that passion into a starting defender role for the Lethbridge College Kodiaks women's soccer team in 2017. Her composure with the ball and ability to read plays quickly earned the trust of head coach Sean Carey. She started every game and was named the team's Newcomer of the Year after an impressive rookie season.

On the pitch, her future was bright. But in a single moment, her life completely changed. In July 2018, Vair suffered a lawnmower accident on her parents' farm – causing an injury that nearly took her life.

She managed to grab her phone and call 911, with paramedics arriving on the scene an hour later. An ambulance rushed her to Calgary on the ground as a storm had come in and STARS couldn't fly, and doctors managed to save her left leg. However, they were forced to amputate her right leg below the knee. She also required major reconstruction of her left heel, needed multiple



additional surgeries and had to learn to walk again.

Even during those shocking initial days after the accident, though, everyone close to her knew it wasn't going to keep her away from sports for very long.

"I can remember the phone call when it came through from her brother," recalls Carey. "It didn't sink in for a little bit. But once I visited her with [Kodiaks co-coach] Mark Pries, you quickly realized it was going to take more than this to keep her down. She could've easily just given up, but that's not in her nature. That's not what she's about."

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Finding a way to return to the soccer pitch was on Vair's mind, but a new path emerged as she began her recovery.

Kodiaks Manager of Athletics Todd Caughlin had a connection with the Canadian sitting volleyball program and made a few calls. Soon after, members of the team – including future teammates Jennifer Oakes, Shacarra Orr and Julie Kozun – visited with Vair in the hospital. They shared their stories and invited her to give the sport a try.

The key message? Being an amputee doesn't make you incapable of playing sports. In fact, it can open new and rewarding opportunities.

## SET TWO

### ENTER SITTING VOLLEYBALL

It didn't take long for Vair to take her future teammates up on their offer. Less than one year after her accident, she attended a training camp. Soon after, she was named to the Canadian national women's sitting volleyball team.

Nicole Ban has been head coach of the team since 2015. She says the athletes have a unique bond that goes well beyond that of a typical sports team.

"The support system on the team is truly incredible," says Ban. "Although each athlete has a unique experience and an incredible story, they can relate to the trauma they have each experienced and the adversity that they faced. They can also help each other by supporting teammates through new changes such as wearing a prosthetic or phantom limb pain, as well as showing each other best ways to sit on the court and play our sport. Our team is a safe space where differences are celebrated, and our team's uniqueness is what makes us so resilient."

Sitting volleyball is a lot like standing volleyball – but much faster. It's played on a smaller court with a lower net, and players must contact the court with some part of the body between the buttocks and shoulders at all times during playing actions.

"Payden has caught on to sitting volleyball as she brings a lot of sport knowledge and competitiveness to our team, but the unique ways in which Payden must sit on the ground and move with her hands is difficult. Adding the speed at which the sport is played internationally is another thing," says Ban.

Vair is the first to admit learning a new sport has its challenges – and there's lots to keep learning.

"As much as I want to say it was easy, it was not," says Vair. "I played high school volleyball, but I definitely wasn't the best at it. For me, sports always came easy, and then I joined [sitting] volleyball and it wasn't something I was good at. I mean it's not fast on your feet – it's fast on your hands and on your butt."

Despite the learning curve, Vair credits her teammates and coaches with continuing to support and push her.

"I'm still adapting and I'm still learning," she says. "The girls have been great with helping me learn new skills and changing a lot of my bad habits. I'm still struggling with it, but I'm improving every day."



## SET THREE

### ARRIVING IN JAPAN

For Vair and her teammates, heading to Tokyo was the realization of a dream they didn't think would happen. Vair had made her Team Canada sitting volleyball debut at the 2019 Parapan American Games in Peru, when the team earned a bronze medal. They then secured their spot at the Paralympics in February 2020 after winning a last-chance qualifier in Halifax. But soon after that, the start of the pandemic cast doubt on the future of the games.

With the Paralympics delayed and the world seemingly on pause, Vair found creative ways to continue her training – and also celebrated a major life moment. She married Carson Vair in June 2020, hosting an intimate wedding on her parents' farm.

With gyms and training facilities shut down, Vair was able to continue working on movement and volleyball-specific drills after her husband, with help from the community, constructed a temporary court out of plywood and puck board.

Vair and her teammates were relieved to finally be Tokyo bound in August 2021. After a 30-hour travel day to Japan, the team attended a staging camp in Shiwa Town, an eight-hour drive north of Tokyo, to acclimatize and prepare for the Paralympics.

In addition to daily training sessions, they also got their first taste of Japanese hospitality and culture. "The Japanese people are amazing," Vair recalls. "They're so kind, and it was kind of cool to just be treated as a professional athlete at that level."



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Food was available around the clock and included opportunities to try local cuisine. The organizers took care of every detail, including a cultural showcase at the end of their camp to send the team off to the games.

Once the team arrived in Tokyo, they were immediately struck by the grand scale of the games. "We were just overwhelmed by the number of volunteers initially," says Vair. "It seemed like the volunteers knew your back story. I'd even get a few people asking me about soccer. It was awesome."

The impact of the pandemic was evident throughout the games. Athletes underwent daily COVID tests and had few chances to interact with competitors from other countries. Touring the city outside of the athletes' village was prohibited. Strength and conditioning opportunities were limited too, since COVID outbreaks had been linked to gym areas during the Olympic games.

Still, the team made the most of it. For Vair, a typical practice day included team sessions and mental training, then time for team bonding. One of the best parts? A two-storey food court open around the clock. "The food was pretty good considering how many people they had to cook for," says Vair.

As for the cardboard beds that drew plenty of media attention? "They were awful," laughs Vair. "We actually got some mattress covers for them, so we covered those up to make it better."

## SET FOUR

### THE GAMES

After finishing seventh at its Paralympic debut in Rio 2016, Team Canada was considered an underdog heading into the tournament despite being ranked fifth in the world.

"Going into it, nobody had big expectations for us," said Vair. "We were kind of the underdogs of the whole thing, and we really blew all the countries away with how well we played."

The team kicked off the round robin against rival Brazil, dropping a tough five set decision – including a heartbreaking fifth set 17-15. There were nerves before the first game, but Vair says they were proud of how they played.

"That game, it was a big deal," she says. "We played really good our first match and we were happy with our outcome even though we didn't end up winning. It was a good test, and we knew we were going to match up with them again."

Vair embraced her role as a serving sub, coming in to serve in high pressure situations late in games when her team needed points the most. She says getting her first ace was a moment she'll never forget. "It kind of shocked me and I was just like 'Oh my gosh, I got my own point in the Paralympics!' That was just a big step for me."

Canada went on to win its next two matches against Italy (3-1) and host Japan (3-0), earning a berth in the semifinals and guaranteeing them a new best Paralympic finish. But the team wasn't satisfied – they wanted a spot on the podium.

They matched up against world No. 2-ranked China in the semifinals but couldn't pull off an upset, dropping a straight sets decision. While the loss was disappointing, the team was excited for one last showdown with Brazil – this time with a bronze medal on the line.

The bronze medal game was a tight, hard fought battle. The teams split the opening two sets, before Brazil squeezed out a 26-24 win in set three. With the bronze medal in their sights, the Brazilians took control of set four to win the match – sending Canada back to the locker room devastated.

"I wish I could say it was the best that we've ever played and it's hard to admit that we just didn't bring our game for that match, which was really unfortunate," recalls Vair. "Losing that game was probably the toughest thing for me and my teammates. I've never heard a quieter locker room in my life."

## SET FIVE

### PREPARING FOR PARIS

Despite the disappointing finish, Vair returned home with unforgettable memories – and a burning desire to win a medal at the next Paralympic games in Paris 2024.

"We're already back grinding," says Vair, who is balancing her training with taking courses at the University of Lethbridge, pursuing her dream of being an educator, and working a part-time job at an automotive shop in Cardston. "Right now, I'm just getting as many touches in as I can at home, while continuing my strength and nutrition training. Our focus is on locking in that position to go to Paris and then train as hard as we can to take home a medal. Three years seems far away, but it comes so fast and it's going to be here before we know it."

She has a personal goal to earn a starting role for the team, something her coach sees her striving towards every time she hits the court.

"Payden has developed immensely within her time with the program," says Ban. "She works incredibly hard, and as a serving sub in Tokyo she performed under an immense amount of pressure, serving often at the end of the game or when we needed a point most. She has embraced that and succeeded, but I don't see Payden stopping there. She wants to continue to work on her back-row skills of serving and defence so she can push for an even bigger role as we move into Paris 2024."

Vair can't wait. "It was really hard to have that medal on the line and come up short," in Tokyo, she says. "It definitely fuels the fire for the future."

At times, Vair still can't believe she's playing volleyball at an international level. Yet she remains grateful for the opportunities the sport has given her.

"Even looking back, it just doesn't make sense to me. How did I go from playing soccer to totally switching from feet to hands for volleyball?" says Vair. "The accident really was an awful situation. It was traumatic and it changed my whole life. With that said, it's amazing how such a negative experience has made such a positive difference in my life. I would have never had the opportunities I'm having today."

[Read even more about Payden Vair's Paralympic story online at widerhorizons.ca.](https://www.widerhorizons.ca)

## THE KODIAKS CONNECTION

Payden Olsen Vair says words can't describe how much the support she received from the entire Kodiaks family helped her through a very difficult recovery process. "I didn't realize how close the Kodiaks family was really until I was in the hospital," says Vair.

She fondly remembers a special hospital visit from a Kodiaks alumni member – one she didn't even know. She says he was part of the Kodiaks family and wanted to be there to support her.

Lethbridge College Athletic Manager Todd Caughlin isn't surprised to hear about that support from the extended Kodiaks community. "We strive to create an environment where all of our Kodiaks are like family," says Caughlin. "Once you're a Kodiak, you're always a Kodiak, and Payden is an important part of that culture."

Kodiaks soccer head coach Sean Carey and his coaching staff also made frequent hospital visits during Vair's recovery and have ensured Vair remains connected to the team to this day.

"Having the Kodiaks just be there through my whole hospital experience made it feel like I was able to get through it," says Vair. "Sean and the rest of the coaching staff were amazing, always asking me if I needed anything. Honestly, it was the best. I wish I could attend the college forever. They were truly amazing in supporting me and I can't say thank you enough. I love being a Kodiak and I'm so thankful that I went to school there. The Kodiaks will always be my family."

