

Pass It On®...

The Long Shot.

Hunter Woodhall won state in the 400 meters with a blistering time of 47.64 seconds — without legs.

The Olympics always produces some of the most memorable images of the year, and the 2024 Paris event was no different. We love come-from-behind stories, we love our heroes, we love sportsmanship gestures between competitors and countries, and we love love stories.

Paris, the city of love, gave us the image of Tara Davis outleaping the world in the long jump, then leaping into her new husband's arms. The golden couple met while competing, Davis in the Olympic long jump and Hunter Woodhall in the 400 meters in the Paralympics. How did this fairy tale come to be?

Scott Mansch of the Great Falls Tribune interviewed Woodhall and his family back in 2016, when Woodhall was 17 years old, after the youngster strode confidently into the local barbershop on prosthetic legs, the high-tech kind they call "blades." Watching him run in those days was remarkable. His lithe body strode smoothly, perfectly balanced, the upper body in fluid cadence, hip flexors and thigh muscles pumping in rhythm. Achieving the kind of technique to get around the track so quickly would take much more practice than with natural legs. But Woodhall was confident he could do it. There was no pity in his family, only a bunch of rowdy, athletic siblings and cousins to try to keep up with.

"Nobody ever treated him different, from day one," says Woodhall's uncle Wyatt. "He's the most determined kid I've ever seen."

Woodhall was born with a condition that prevented the bones in his lower legs from forming. His parents had to make a difficult decision: Amputate the legs below the knee and give their son a chance to walk, or accept what was and keep Woodhall in a wheelchair his whole life. The

emotional decision to have the surgery turned out to be the best thing for Woodhall.

"He's exactly the way he's supposed to be and has the talent he's supposed to have," says his father, Steve.

Woodhall went on to compete in youth football, basketball and wrestling. He rollerblades and skateboards. As he got older, it was on the track where he found himself, that lonely oval that pushes back the same way every day: relentless, unyielding, no matter how many times you attack it. Woodhall competed locally, in the Western states and internationally. He won the Utah state high school championship in the 400 with an astonishing 47.64 seconds. He went on to compete in college against able-bodied athletes, and then the Paralympics.

The motivation to continually get better has had to come from within. "Coaches treat you differently," Steve says. "They don't necessarily get mad at you, they kind of put you in a glass box. So the motivation and work ethic, that's all his. Nobody pushed him. He's pushed himself."

As the miles on the track have added up, so have the medals. Woodhall has competed in the World Championships and the Paralympics since 2015, and dozens of competitions along the way. Track is where he belongs, and it is where he met the love of his life, Olympic Gold Medalist Davis. The embrace that melted a million hearts also delivered the most profound line from one champion to another: "I knew you could do it," Woodhall said to Davis, to himself and to all of us.

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