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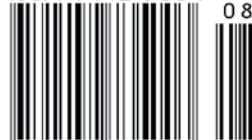


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Libby Kosmala's golden touch

by senior correspondent Jennifer Martens



Libby claims yet another gold medal!

The shooting sports almost missed out on claiming nine-time Paralympic Gold medallist Libby Kosmala as its own when she declined an invitation to try the sport in 1970. Good friend and shooter Kevin Bowden persisted and pestered the then-talented archer until she finally agreed to give air rifle shooting a go. Thirty-eight years later, it is a decision she will never regret, for the sport has taken Libby on one roller-coaster of a ride. The 2008 Paralympics in Beijing will be Libby's tenth Paralympic Games. The South Australian has competed in more Games than any other athlete, able-bodied or not.

Her skill in the shooting sports is truly extraordinary. Her first shot with an air rifle from 10m was a bullseye, as was the second. Since then, leaving her mark in the middle of a target is a frequent occurrence for Libby, who at 66 years of age is still a world-class athlete. She'll tell you that she inherited her athletic skill and competitiveness from her father. Experts in competitive shooting will tell you that Libby is one of a kind.

No-one can achieve what Libby has without significant innate ability, but the SSAA member has relied on Yvonne Hill, her local coach since the start of her shooting career, during the tough times. "I work with Yvonne as often as I need to... and she is always there when I call."

Libby is also trained by National Rifle Shooting Coach Miro Sepic. Miro is based in Melbourne and is the coach for both able-bodied and disabled Australian National Team members. Libby says she is fortunate to be able to travel to Sydney and Melbourne to compete with - not against - the able-bodied shooters.

Libby is confined to a wheelchair due to an injury at birth. However, her disability has not prevented her from achieving any of her goals and ambitions. She's a successful career woman, a wife and the mother of two boys. She has nine Paralympic gold medals

Nine-time Paralympian Libby Kosmala.



Libby in action.



and she is one of the world's best shooters.

If she were allowed to compete against the able-bodied shooters, she would certainly hold her own. She gains no advantage by shooting in a wheelchair. In fact, it is a disadvantage. Libby is a great advocate for the sport and it is incredible to see someone at her age consistently win medals and set records.

Only six years after she took up the sport, Libby, then surnamed Richards, won a gold medal at the 1976 Toronto Paralympics. She remembers the 3-Positional competition well because of the peculiar conditions in which they had to shoot. The underground police barracks could hold only 10 or 12 shooters at one time. The 60-shot match that pooled both men and women took three and a half days to complete. While waiting for the results of the event, she heard, "Richards, Gold" echo out the loud speaker. Needless to say, she was overwhelmed with excitement.

When she went to collect her medal, however, the officials were confused. "They were expecting to hand the medal to a man," said Libby, "They were quite surprised to find out that 'Richards' was me!"

The 1984 Games in England and the 1988 Games in Seoul, Korea, also hold special memories for Libby. In England, she won four gold medals while breaking four world records in the 10m Air Rifle events. The Paralympics in Seoul could have been the sweetest. She added to her medal tally another three gold and a silver medal and she watched her husband, Paralympian Stan Kosmala, win a gold medal for Lawn Bowls in pairs. She celebrated her 60th birthday at the World Championships in Korea in 2002 where she won a further gold. She counts her gold medal as one of the best birthday presents ever.

In addition to the reward of Paralympic and World Cup titles, Libby's involvement in shooting has introduced her to many interesting people, opened doors to new and lasting friendships and exposed her to many unique and beautiful places around the world. Her success has opened up professional and civic opportunities as well - Libby is immersed in Australia's motivational speaking circuit and she has accepted positions on the TransAdelaide Board and the Physiotherapy Board of South Australia.

Libby is humble while being proud of her accomplishments. With her nine Paralympic gold medals and countless other medals she would have every right to erect a virtual shrine of her success. But she sheepishly admits that most of her medals would be found wrapped in socks and stored in boxes throughout her house.

Despite the many hours spent sitting in aeroplanes, crossing numerous time zones, the confusion of foreign languages, lost baggage and the extreme fatigue associated with overseas competitions, Libby has always loved to travel and most of her experiences have been pleasantly memorable. However, like most seasoned travellers, she's had a few trips she'd rather forget.

Her trip to the German Nationals in 2003 was the worst. Everything was going well until she and a team-mate were due to pick up their wheelchairs (worth \$3000 apiece) in Munich. After hours of waiting, asking questions and wondering if the chairs would be coming in on a different flight, they realised that someone had stolen them. "It was quite distressing," said Libby. "Not only to lose the chair I had always competed in, but to lose the chair in which I had so many memories. I won many medals in that chair and I raised both of my

children in that chair." But even an incident as upsetting as that didn't deter the spirited champion - she went on to shoot in four events, using a borrowed wheelchair from a Danish man.

After so many years of competing and shooting, Libby is truly a master of her craft. She says she doesn't train as hard as she used to because everything is semi-automatic. "But I do have to keep fit and focused.

"Four people scored 600 out of 600 in the European Open Shooting Championships for the Disabled last year [2007] in Germany. So to be able to compete at that kind of level, I need to maintain my mental toughness," she says.

She does this by incorporating a variety of training regimes. In addition to shooting, she listens to mental training tapes, utilises positive imagery techniques, swims and pushes her wheelchair 5 to 6km three times a week. She also is careful about what she eats and drinks, steering clear of drinks containing caffeine - particularly during the week before a competition.

Libby trains at the Wingfield Rifle Range in Wingfield, South Australia. She shoots both 10m Air Rifle and 50m Smallbore Rifle, competing in two events for each discipline.

In addition to her training, Libby works as the public relations/fundraiser officer for The Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of South Australia Inc.

As one of the most accomplished Games athletes in the world, Libby is also one of the oldest. When asked when she planned to retire, she said, "That is up to my coach and will depend on my results at the Paralympics." If all goes to plan in Beijing, Libby will walk away with her tenth gold medal and further secure her place in sporting history. ●



An example of Libby's medal-winning shooting performance.