

Karmen Health Scholarship

David Gelfand

Describe the biggest accomplishment as a result of your mobility disability.

The water rushes up to greet me as I barrel across the pool like a shark chasing its prey, driving the water back behind me. I push through my exhaustion as I near the touchpad, hoping for a time fast enough to qualify for the 2016 US Paralympic Team. The scoreboard quickly updates to show that I earned my third gold medal and my seventh personal best of the meet. Although it has been an incredible competition for me, my times are not fast enough to represent the United States on the world stage. But remember the name David Gelfand. You will see me swimming for Team USA in the Tokyo Paralympics two years from now in 2020.

I was born with Proximal Femoral Focal Deficiency, which means my left leg ends where my right knee is. One of the first sports I excelled in was swimming. When I am in the water, I feel free; I can compete with and even beat my able-bodied peers despite my physical challenge. I love the competition and the reward of seeing my name as number one on the scoreboard. When I swim, I don't have another leg to give me a balanced and powerful kick. My short leg can't stabilize me, and as a result, my right leg's kick has to be more measured to maintain stability. For sixteen plus hours a week, I toil and train with little more than a square foot of fabric covering my body. In a swimsuit, I cannot hide my differences. Since I don't worry about what others think about me, my self-confidence has increased. Now, I focus on what they think of me as a swimmer and competitor.

Swimming has taught me to concentrate on the process as much as the results. Over the years, I have faced many challenges in my career. Two years ago, I competed at the US

Paralympic Trials against the top disabled athletes in the country. To earn my spot at the games, I had to excel and drop a few elusive seconds. I won three gold medals, but my times were not fast enough to earn a ticket to Rio. Despite falling short of my goal, I learned that one of the keys to improving myself is constantly evaluating my technique and finding opportunities for improvement. Recently, one of the coaches I trained with told me that my start didn't have the same power as similar athletes. I took this feedback in stride and immediately set out to practice how to start with as much speed and force as my competitors. After reaching out to the strength trainer at the Olympic Training Center, I was able to get a better idea of workouts that would help improve starts. He advised both my home coach and me on ways to improve my power off the blocks, including exercises like broad jumps and jump downs. Now, when I start, I can propel myself at least a foot further and enter the water with significantly more speed.

To be selected for the Paralympic Games, I needed to train with both intensity and consistency. Leading up to competing in trials, I trained seventeen hours a week, including three 6 a.m. practices, five afternoon practices, and three dryland workouts. I didn't miss a single practice from April to trials in June. My hard work in the pool has helped me to improve my technique and endurance. Every day I challenge myself to swim faster, even on kick sets where I sometimes have trouble keeping up with my able bodied teammates. There have been days when at the end of a long, difficult practice, I have pushed myself to a time within a second or two of my best.

Through the sport of swimming, I have learned to be committed, confident, and comfortable with myself. Swimming has helped me realize that my physical challenge is something to be proud of; something that shapes who I am.