

## Paralympic Academy

Greta Neimanas decided she was going to get a bike and start pedaling her way to make the US team for Beijing, China, 2008.

At 12:30 PM the group watched the first medal ceremony for the US after cyclists Karissa Whitsell (Springfield, Oregon) and Katie Compton (Colorado Springs, Colorado) earned the silver in the women's B1-3 tandem kilometer time trial with a time of 1:11.221.

The group then shifted gears and headed to the indoor hall to watch the US men's wheelchair basketball team defeat Japan, 54-46. Although the team got off to a slow start in the first half, it managed the eight-point victory behind a strong second-half surge and clutch free throws late in the game, and, of course, the loud chants of "U-S-A" by the Academy entourage.

Another early breakfast brought in yet another Paralympic athlete to speak to the Academy members: Travis Mohr. Travis, a dwarf swimmer and engineer, spoke about the sacrifices it takes to make the Paralympic Team. His statement, "Every day that you don't practice is a day that someone else is getting better," made a powerful impact on Casandra Rightmyer, an aspiring basketball player. Her mother commented, "When Casandra returned home to Alabama, we had to get to basketball practice that night, because she is not going to miss any more practice."

Scott Douglass, assistant chef de mission (Birmingham, Alabama) and three-time Paralympian and bronze medalist in

the wheelchair tennis doubles in 2000 in Sydney, reiterated the importance of believing in yourself and sacrifice in order to achieve your dream. His comments wrapped up all of the previous speakers' points very nicely.

Later, the participants were back at the indoor hall watching the women's wheelchair basketball team lose a heartbreaker to Australia, 62-61.

Next stop was swimming. However, the venue was sold out. Though some of the participants were upset about not getting in, all were pleased to cheer on Steve Welch, Bedford, Texas, at the tennis venue.

On the way to the tennis venue, the Academy kids ran into tennis sensation Karin Korb (Atlanta, Georgia), who graciously took time to speak to them about her Paralympic experiences and encourage them to continue to pursue their dreams.

Welch cruised to a win over Japan's Tyoichi (6-1; 6-0) and came out to meet the Paralympic kids. He took photos and signed autographs and continued the encouraging words they were getting at every stop.

### Visiting the Village

The final surprise of the day came when the kids and coaches were accepted to visit the Paralympic Village. "I was surprised to see how far the Village was from the rest of Athens," observed Greta Neimanas. Will Carlin and Sarah Billmyer gave an introduction about what they would see in the Village. They showed where the flag-raising ceremony would take place and where the USA dorms were. They were also able to go to the training and relaxation rooms for the US athletes.

"I can't believe I met Carlee [Hoffman], She was just, like, sitting there watching TV in the village," exclaimed Melanie Rightmyer, who, like Carlee, is a bilateral below-knee amputee.

After a quick shopping spree at the Paralympic Store, it was back to the venue to watch track and field. Classification T11 (visually impaired) was going on in the long jump. "I was amazed the people were jumping so far and could not see where they were going or where they were going to land," noticed Rightmyer.

The participants then made their way back to the Royal Olympic with dreams of Torino, Italy, and Beijing, China, dancing in their heads.

### Goodbyes and Memories

The trip ended just as fast as it began. We reflected on what the Paralympic Academy group had learned from the athletes and competition. The kids agreed that it was time for them to spread the word back in the United States about just how awesome the Paralympic Games are. They also agreed that it was their duty to find other athletes and help bring them along, so future US teams will be that much stronger.

The kids stayed up all night talking about their time in Athens. Though the goodbyes were tearful, their friendships were just beginning—and they would have lifelong memories to take home.



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