

THIRD

ISSUE 6

BODY

MOVEMENTS



JULIE ROGERS: PARALYMPIAN POWERHOUSE

Interview by **Lyla Johnston**

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JULIE WEARS:
top & skirt,
VINTAGE
CHRISTIAN DIOR;
sports Bra, NIKE;
trainers,
ROMBAUT;
earrings, SIMONE
ROCHA;
rings, Stylist's own





JULIE WEARS:
burgundy jacket,
ADIDAS; jacket,
KAY KWOK

At 23, poly-paralympian Julie Rogers has already had a storied, decade-long career as an athlete. Born without the tibia and fibula in her right leg and having had it amputated at age two, she discovered the world of disability sport after being bullied at school, disillusioned by the ableism she faced playing mainstream sport.

Joining the elite ranks at age 11 before graduating to Paralympian status at 13, Julie's multifaceted nature and adaptability has led her from volleyball, to sprinting, and most recently, to discus – all while also working as an advisor at a financial planning firm. Having missed out on the opportunity to qualify for Tokyo 2020 due to injuring her “good” leg, it's no wonder Paris 2024 is directly in her line of sight, with her unique attitude to avoid “working through the pain” informing her training schedule.

Two years before she hopes to fly to the French capital, Julie's current landscape appears to be an effortless balance between her day job and a run of freshly-beaten personal bests, alongside her commitment to raising money for the charity Legs4Africa. Not only that, but having never encountered a fellow female amputee in real life until age nine, she now also models on the side, in hopes of offering the much-needed representation that she never had in childhood.

It's a pleasure to sit down with Julie as she shares some insights on her experience as a disabled, mixed British and Chinese woman in sport, discusses how she prepares for majors, and gives her opinion on how sports can be made more accessible.

Lyla Johnston: How did it feel initially entering the elite sports world as a disabled Asian woman?

Julie Rogers: As I've been involved in the elite sports world since I was about 11, I barely remember what I was like at that age; but I'd certainly say that there was a level of ignorance and naivete, which was probably for the best. Because when you have more awareness, coming from a minority background, you pick up more on the disparity. As a woman with a disability, I've always prided myself on being more than that. Obviously there's a lot of [difference in] opportunities, and my personality is built off the back of growing up with a disability; but in terms of how I found it in the sporting world, I'm just so unapologetically

myself that it's not really been an issue. I think that if you own the way you are, then you're less likely to come across resistance. I can't speak on other people's experience, but for me personally, I've just never allowed it to be an issue.

LJ: How do you think the sports industry can be made more accessible?

JR: I'd say access to information is the key point – I only got into disability sport because I was an overweight child. I was very sporty growing up; my father ran a martial arts school and I did that. Then I was bullied at primary school, so I isolated myself away and got unhealthy. I didn't want to do mainstream sport, but I didn't know that disability sport existed. The world has certainly changed, especially since London 2012 and the legacy of the Paralympic Games, where a lot of children, especially children with disabilities, became aware that there are opportunities out there to get involved in sport. I certainly still come across people that aren't aware of where they can start, or who they could talk to if they wanted to get involved in a sport as someone with a disability – them not knowing that actually, for example, most tennis clubs will allow a person with disabilities to just join in. So in the sporting world, it's just been easier to know what [facilities are] around, especially in your local community. Not everyone wants to train to be a Paralympian; they may want to train to be able to jog around the park with their dog, or keep up with their toddler. There has to be an easy [entry point] for you to be like, “Oh, yeah, I can do that. I can see myself doing that to reintroduce myself into the sporting world.”

LJ: You missed last year's Paralympics because of a knee injury. How have you been recuperating from that, and how has it affected your practice?

JR: Last year was really frustrating for me, because

I was in a really good place with my sprinting. I suffered a femur fracture, which meant that I couldn't run the times I needed to go to my third Paralympic Games, essentially. It was a massive wake up call, in terms of the stress I put my body under – especially as someone with a disability. My fracture really changed my view on how I should look after my body, and respect that my good leg, or my non-amputated left side, has actually been doing a hell of a lot of work for a long time. In terms of how I got over it, I'm certainly more conscious of how I look after my body. I've got new sponsors on board for my running blades, so I'm setting them up in a more efficient way, which is super exciting. [Recuperating] was basically learning from the injury, so that I look after myself a bit more; and also getting people on board that are going to make sure that my running blades are set up in the best way for me, to minimise the chance of injury.

LJ: Was skipping this significant sporting event difficult?

JR: It was disheartening because it would have been my third Paralympic Games, but I learned a lot from the situation. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't tough for me, in the sense that it did make me reevaluate what I wanted from sport. But it also made me hungrier; there's almost two battles in my brain. The one half was gutted, but the second half was gutted to the point of, "Why even go for the next one?" I trained from Rio 2016 to 2021, so it had already been five years. I invested so much of my time and energy into it, then the work I put in was just completely lost because I broke a bone. It was awful. That's not to say that I would have definitely been selected again; but because you trained for five years, you know how bad you want it. I'm only 23, right? Tokyo was a unique experience with COVID and, ultimately, I'll have an opportunity to show what I can do now that I'm back at full fitness. So it was disappointing and disheartening at the time, but I very quickly reestablished my goals and decided to commit again.

LJ: How do you mentally prepare for big competitions, such as the Commonwealth Games and Paris 2024?

JR: I always work off a goal-orientated way of training, and programming of what I'm doing for that. I know that if I follow a programme, and [know] what I need to do in training in the lead up to a competition, then I'm physically prepared, and then the mental preparation is derived from that. So mentally, I know I've done what I needed to do and I have trust in the process. But of course, we all have our own things to

get stronger at. If you know you've done the training, it will come together because that's what you've been training for. You have to trust and believe in what you've been doing in the lead up to the competition.

LJ: You've recently come off a #1 finish and personal best at the athletics championships in Turkey. How does that feel?

JR: In athletics, my primary event is the 100m. I'm a sprinter by trade – that's what I've done since I was 14 – but in recent years, I've turned some of my training to the discus throw. So, that competition was actually for discus. I've been training in the discus alongside a performance group, in hopes to qualify for the Commonwealth Games this year. I actually bettered my personal best last Saturday. It's just a learning process right now, so it feels really nice to be competing and bettering my performance in a new event.

LJ: I saw you make many posts on Twitter about being short. Do you believe your height, or lack thereof, play a role in your athletic practice?

JR: I comment about my height in a humorous way, but it's not something that bothers me. Obviously, in terms of athletic performance, different heights can optimise different athletics events; but really, even then, there is definitely a bell curve. People say, "Short sprinters run faster," but then there's Usain Bolt outside of that trend. So I would say, height is a little bit irrelevant, and that you should just train to maximise your own body type.

LJ: You've spent the past three years teaming up with Legs4Africa to help disabled people and amputees in the continent find suitable prosthetics. What motivated you to support this cause?

JR: I've had an interest in charities that provide prosthetic legs in less fortunate countries. With age, I realised how fortunate I am to be living not only in a developed country, but a country with top health care and provisions to provide kids and adults with prosthetic legs. So I've always been keen to find a charity that did that, but I couldn't find one that wasn't associated with other motives. When I came across Legs4Africa, it was an immediate "I want to be involved and I want to help," because this charity is purely driven by providing prosthetic care and legs in less developed countries. It's not fair that people don't have the same access and rights to mobility, freedom and independence, just because of the country they're born in. I wanted to be involved in the redistribution of that access in that world.

“Learn to love and appreciate what your body can do, want to get better for yourself, and don't compare your journey with anybody else's.”



JULIE WEARS:
dress,
REDEMPTION;
earrings, BUTLER
& WILSON;
shoes, EMMA
HYACINTH

“The world has certainly changed, especially since London 2012 and the legacy of the Paralympic Games, where a lot of children, especially children with disabilities, became aware that there are opportunities out there to get involved in sport.”

LJ: Do you have any stories to share from your work with the charity?

JR: I kept a lot of my prosthetic legs from when I was a baby, and I guess I thought they had no sentimental value. One of the best parts for me was being able to give them a bag of junior legs, knowing that they would be used to help little toddlers and young children walk again – which is of much higher value than a bunch of old legs sitting in the loft. There’s nothing more important than changing someone’s life with something so simple.

LJ: Have you ever felt othered within the sports industry?

JR: Especially in Britain, we do have a level of respect for elite athletes, especially in athletics. But when I’ve gone to competitions abroad, which are mixed with the Olympic side or the able-bodied side, there have been situations where it’s clear that the treatment of the Para athletes is different. There have been situations and competitions where, for example, all the Para athletes aren’t even staying at the same hotel [as the able-bodied athletes], and that just felt like unnecessary exclusion. Like, you want us to race there and be involved in this competition, but you’re not really involving us.

LJ: You recently modeled for sports brands Lefties and Runners Need. Is modeling something that you see yourself doing long-term?

JR: There’s certainly a place for it in what I’m looking to do as an individual, which is to basically provide representation, not just as an athlete, but as an athlete with a disability. An athlete who’s mixed and Asian in England. As long as there’s a place for me to do it, I will do it, because it’s so much bigger than just being a model. The world is certainly changing in terms of representation across brands. I think the importance of [showing representation] is far greater than getting

nice photos. My niece wears hearing aids and, as she grows up, I know the impact it will have on her to see a magazine model wearing hearing aids, for example. When I grew up, I genuinely thought I was the only young female in the world with one leg, because social media wasn’t a thing, and representation in the media and TV wasn’t a thing. So that’s why I do it.

Obviously, [disabled people] were out there, and there were people in the public eye with disabilities, but it’s not in your face as a kid. Only 15 years ago – when I was seven or eight and shaping my fundamental opinion of myself – there weren’t posters in a store of models with disabilities. Or if there were, it’d be something that would just pass you by. You didn’t have Instagram and Tiktok, and stuff where you could come across people that look different.

I think I came across my first female amputee when I was nine, because my hospital was typically [full of] older men, either from acquiring injuries from traumatic accidents, such as serving in the army, or from ill health – and that was in Oxford, not even near where I live. So, it was really like we didn’t exist and there was no one else, and you know, kids feel like that about their hair colour. It’s just typical. The representation a couple of decades ago just wasn’t there.

LJ: What advice would you give to future Paralympians and Olympians in the making?

JR: Do something that you genuinely enjoy and want to get good at; don’t fixate on achieving achievements that are not in your control, or goalposts that you can’t control. Always have goals that revolve around yourself and how you achieve those as an individual.

LJ: On a final note, is there anything you’d like to say that you haven’t already?

JR: Learn to love and appreciate what your body can do, want to get better for yourself, and don’t compare your journey with anybody else’s.



JULIE WEARS:
tank top, THE
NORTH FACE;
earrings, JILL
HOPKINS;
necklace,
ALIGNIERI