



# Paracanoes and the CANADIAN Connection

By Adrienne Skinner



***Did you know that Canada is consistently a strong force in the sport of sprint canoe kayak racing? Over many decades, Canada has developed a reputation for producing world champions like Larry Cain, Adam VanKoeverden, Sue Holloway, John Wood, Mark Oldershaw and many others. Not surprisingly, our country also led the way in bringing the sport of paracanoe to the Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 for the first time. Canada also hosted the first international paracanoe conference in Montreal in 2008, which attracted representatives from nine countries. From that point, there was a push to meet the requirements to have paracanoe added to the Paralympics.***

Although it was 11 years ago, I remember it clearly. I had volunteered to help launch PaddleAll, the national adaptive program in western Ontario, and that's how I found myself at that first paracanoe conference. I was also the only athlete there with a disability. When it was clear that we needed a para-athlete to represent Canada at the upcoming European Cup, the entire room of delegates looked toward me. Yikes! I had done some racing, but came

to the sport as an adult and was not what you would call "high-performance."

Years before, I had come upon the Mississauga Canoe Club in Port Credit when I was looking for a spot to slip my kayak into the cool waters of the Credit River. Any sport that had to do with water called my name. Water for me, an above-knee amputee, provided a sense of freedom and I signed up on the spot. Over the next 20 years the club became a second home to me. In paddle sports, athletes of different ages often mix and the older, more experienced paddlers become mentors to the younger kids. It creates a great family atmosphere where you forge life-long friendships.

The two-person Canadian team consisting of myself and a recreational paddler named Jim Mahaffy, went on to compete in Milan at

the European Cup in that spring of 2008. Subsequently, paracanoe was a demonstration event at the World Championships for the first time, in Halifax in 2009. From there, competitors like Christine Selinger from Regina catapulted Canada to the forefront of paracanoe on the international stage. She won several medals, including two World Championship golds. Erica Scarff of Mississauga represented Canada in Rio and is still on the national team.

Paracanoe is great for anyone who has limited lower body mobility. Next to swimming, paddle sports are the most popular water sport for those with a mobility issue. All equipment is provided and a comprehensive safety orientation is part of the program. When I started kayaking there wasn't any adaptive programming and I had to figure things out on my own. I tried to hold the rudder between my toes:

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not a good long-term solution. Today, coaches are able to help adapt equipment to suit the paddler's individual needs. I now use a steering mechanism which loops around my foot to control the rudder. A game changer!

Paracanoe sprint races involve two types of boats, kayak and va'a. The kayak is propelled by a double-blade paddle, while the va'a is an outrigger canoe with an ama (second pontoon) as a support float and is used with a single-blade paddle. Both kayak and va'a have three different classes of events for men and women, depending upon the classification of an ath-

lete's disability. At the international level all paracanoe races are individual events and competed at a distance of 200m. Just as all ages are included at the regatta, so are all abilities. The paracanoe races are run along with the other events at all local, divisional and national regattas.

It's official! The sport continues to gain momentum. Para-va'a has now been added to the Tokyo Paralympics in 2020 and it has been confirmed that paracanoe will be contested in Paris in 2024. The paracanoe World Conference was held in Stockholm, Sweden in 2018, with the objective of

widening the scope of the sport.

The sport itself is different because you get to go out on the waterways. Racing doesn't play a big part of my paddling life any longer. In recent years, I've tried both stand-up paddling and white water canoeing. There is nothing better than getting out on the river either at the end of the day, or during a sunny weekend. Clubs across Ontario offer programs for people of all ages and abilities. Whether you want to race, or just get out on the water, paracanoe is the best way to see another side of life.