

Young Swimmer Leading Push to Put Synchro in Paralympics



Raquel Boales isn't sure if she'll still be competing when synchronized swimming becomes an international Paralympic sport. She's been in the pool since she was just 16 weeks old, earning tons of medals while inspiring others for most of her 13 years.

Her newest effort, pushing for synchro to be included in the U.S. Paralympic program, is sharing time with competitive swimming and her hopes on being accepted to Stanford in a few years.

But she still has a Paralympic goal, even if she might not be in the water.

"I asked her, 'What if it doesn't happen in time for you to be part of the sport?' her mother, **Tina**, said. "And she said, 'Look, if it gets off the ground and I'm not part of the competition, I would love to be the first one to put a medal around that synchro swimmer(s) neck."

Raquel will know all about the hard work that went into that winning swimmer's medal. The Saratoga, Calif., native has been fighting to keep up since a birth injury (BPI), which resulted in her left arm being turned almost backwards, known as Erb's palsy.

Countless hours of therapy, practice and workouts have led to a successful synchro career so far for Raquel, who hopes others get that chance in the U.S. Paralympics someday.

“Even though swimming is already in the Paralympics, synchronized swimming can be an option because not only does it give some of the swimmers an opportunity to accept who they want to be in the water, it also gives them the opportunity to excel at what they love doing,” she said. “In regular swimming I’m not as fast doing laps, but in synchronized swimming it doesn’t matter how fast you are. If you are committed to the sport, you can do great. And that’s what I really hope for when trying to add synchronized swimming to the Paralympics.”



Raquel’s battle

“It was really debilitating – (her arm) was really not functional,” Tina said of her daughter’s condition. “So I was, like any other parent, upset, because I’m thinking, ‘OK, I have only one daughter, and what are her chances of being athletic like me? Like any parent who is super athletic, you would think, ‘OK, what do I do here? How’s this going to work out? What will I say to her when she wants to compete in sports?’”

In the pool, for starters.

Raquel started water therapy at 16 weeks, followed by formal swimming therapy at 6 months. When she was 6, doctors transferred muscle from her back into the front of her arm so she’d have forward mobility and improved range of motion. They told her parents that Raquel should avoid other sports due to the risk of damage to the muscle, so the strict water and swimming therapy continued for three more years.

Raquel was ready for a competitive water sport by the time she was 9 years old, and Tina had received a flier about a synchronized swimming team tryout in Los Gatos, Calif.

“And I thought, ‘Why didn’t I think of that?’ I mean, we all know about synchronized swimming. The more I thought about it, it was like, ‘Yeah, this would be an awesome sport! The combination of swim, dance and gymnastics all in the water, what more could we ask for?’

After a month-long trial, Raquel joined the club and soon impressed her teammates and coaches.

“Raquel knew by being in the water for nine years, she knew how to manipulate her body,” Tina said. “So when it came to synchronized swimming, she knew how to do a lot of the things that many other kids with her condition could not. By that time she had a lot of muscle power built up already. During her first season in 2010 she just raked up the medals.”

But not initially. She finished last at her first meet and started crying. “Well, that’s not good enough,” she told her mom. Tina reminded her that she was the only one there with a disability. “So she learned to swim with the best and got up there and proved herself. The first year was phenomenal,” Tina said.

Raquel had a therapist working to help build up her muscles and a private coach to help her catch up with the other swimmers. “She had to battle her disability first and then do her synchronized swimming,” Tina said. “It was a battle that she wanted to do because it was a challenge for her. The icing on the cake was the reward of that medal reinforcing what she did – her challenges were a good thing for her to continue with.”

Raquel’s inspiring story – the only known youth swimmer with a disability competing successfully against able-bodied swimmers – resulted in her being a torchbearer for the 2010 California State Games, and the first synchro swimmer to be so honored. She earned a bronze medal for her solo and a silver medal for her duet.

Swimming for the Angelfish Synchro team in Los Gatos, Calif., Raquel qualified for the 2011 State Games of America in San Diego, where Tina knew she would face stiff competition.

“There were seven other soloists who had eaten her alive all season long in 2011, and she had never placed higher than fourth,” she said.

In addition to her weekday training with the Los Gatos Angelfish, Raquel worked with

two private coaches for three months prior to the 2011 State Games of America. Seven days a week in the water.

Raquel was determined to get better, and her coaches were impressed. One told Tina: "I've worked with a lot of swimmers, and I've never worked with a girl like this. She'll be in the top three."

With some of those same soloists she competed against all year, Raquel took gold.

Paralympic dream

Tina was worried about Raquel's future. It would be difficult for her to pass new proficiency tests for the advanced levels, and she wanted to continue with the sport. A fellow swimming parent suggested that Raquel should compete in the Paralympic games.

"It took almost five years of my daughter swimming synchro, shedding blood, sweat and tears, so that she could prove to the world that she could do it," Tina said. "Her push, every year, putting herself out there and competing, getting knocked down but still competing, I think was the catalyst to say, 'Hey, let's seriously take a look at this.'"

But they soon discovered that although a few countries have added synchro to their own Paralympic programs, synchro is not yet a U.S. Paralympic or an International Paralympic sport. Tina contacted USA Synchro with a proposal.

"Our goal now is to get a committee formed, do the footwork and get it introduced into the U.S. Paralympics," Tina said. "And include military veterans as a part of this. We have a lot of young people, a lot of young swimmers, and they've got a disability because of an injury they've suffered. They're doing a lot of swim therapy already. If these people decide they want to get into a sport, synchronized swimming can be available for them. You have a whole world of people we haven't even scratched the surface with.

"We want this sport to gain momentum. This is going to open the doors for other people with disabilities. It can increase the popularity of the sport. The U.S. Paralympics is gaining in popularity, and we need synchro to be a part of that."

Just last month, Raquel was one of 10 athletes invited to U.S. Paralympic Swimming's Emerging and Developmental Camp. Although synchro isn't an option,

Raquel is also interested in competitive swimming, including the backstroke, which is one of her favorites.

But Tina says her daughter isn't going to give up synchro easily or anytime soon.

"She wants to do both. I'm leaving it up to her, but you're talking to a girl who put her heart and soul into synchronized swimming. But, really, we would like to also use this as a platform to introduce synchronized swimming in the U.S. Paralympics as a sport."

For now, Raquel will continue training and swimming with the Santa Clara Aquamaids, which she joined in 2012, and just recently with the Palo Alto-Stanford Aquatics (PASA) Club, where she will begin training as a para-swimmer.

"I want people to be exposed to it first because most people who are disabled don't know much about synchronized swimming," she said. "Also, I've been competing against able-bodied swimmers for a while – I want to still swim against them. It's a challenge, and I want to progress in that challenge. It will also better prepare me for the competition in the Paralympic Games. I recently found out at my first Disability Meet that I was up against some very good competitive paraswimmers."

She believes she could compete in synchro in U.S Paralympic-sponsored meets and competitions, but hopes that one day, synchronized swimming will ultimately be an international Paralympic sport, where she dreams that she and many other U.S. synchro competitors will one day represent the U.S Paralympics at the Paralympic Games. Perhaps 2020 in Tokyo?

Raquel Boales' synchro accomplishments

First synchronized swimmer to win gold in Novice 11-12 at State Games of America (2011)
28 medals, including 14 gold, from 23 Meets (2010-2013)
Official Ambassador for California State Games
Torchbearer at 2010 California State Games
Torchbearer at 2013 State Games of America
2013 Jerry Smith Sportsmanship Award, Santa Clara Aquamaids

What are the Paralympic Games?

The Paralympic Games are a major international multi-sport event involving athletes with a range of physical and intellectual disabilities, including mobility disabilities,

amputations, blindness and cerebral palsy. There are Winter and Summer Paralympic Games and are held immediately following the respective Olympic Games. The U.S Paralympics, a division of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), was founded in 2001.

In addition to selecting and managing the teams which compete for the United States in the Paralympic Games, U.S. Paralympics is also responsible for supporting Paralympic competitions as well as community and military sports programs around the country. In 2006, the USOC created the Paralympic Military Program with the goal of providing Paralympic sports as a part of the rehabilitation process for injured soldiers.