

Change of plans

Melanie Hawtin reaching new heights in new sport

by **Herb Garbutt**
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Melanie Hawtin was called into a meeting that would potentially have a drastic effect on the path of her athletic career. Now, as the news was being delivered, she could not believe what she was hearing. How could this be true?

Hawtin sat there in shock. Was this a joke, she wondered. She was offered a Kleenex.

"One isn't going to do it," the 25-year-old Oakville resident said. "I'm going to need the whole box."

Successful on the track

Melanie Hawtin had been wheelchair racing since she was five years old. She qualified for her first national championships when she was 10 and won two bronze medals the following year. By age 13, she was racing against the likes of her role model Chantal Peticlerc, the Paralympic track legend.

Hawtin was named the Ontario Wheelchair Sports Association junior female athlete of the year four times and the senior female athlete of the year twice. She earned medals at the 2005 and 2009 Canada Games and competed at the world junior championships.

Her abilities took her around the world. After two decades of dedicating herself to her sport, Hawtin was preparing for the most important season of her career, training to earn a spot on the Canadian Paralympic team in London.

Then in April of 2012, Hawtin, who has spina bifida hydrocephalus, was told she needed surgery. The shunt that drained excess fluid around her brain had snapped. The build-up of fluid was creating pressure on her brain.

The surgery was successful, but it came with a piece of stunning news.

"I couldn't get back in my track chair," Hawtin said. "Track was my life."

Started wheelchair basketball two years ago

It was not the inability to participate in the sport she had dedicated her life to that had Hawtin reaching for the box of Kleenex. That came two weeks ago in Las Vegas.

For the second straight year, Hawtin had attended the Canadian women's wheelchair basketball tryouts. Chris Chandler from the Golden Horseshoe Disabled Sports Association had been trying to convince Hawtin to play basketball since she was 14.

She followed the sport, often going to watch the Burlington Vipers compete in the Spitfire Challenge tournament. As for playing it herself, Hawtin had filled in on the rare occasion a player was needed to fill out the lineup for a local game, but she had never trained or even practised with a team.

With her training for track, there was little time to spare for another sport.

With track out of the picture, Hawtin finally gave basketball a shot. (Because she sat more upright in her chair for basketball, there were fewer complications from the surgery). She showed enough natural ability to make a regional team for the Ontario Games.

"I was so nervous because it was my first major tournament," she said. "That was very scary but it was such an awesome experience."

Though her team lost in the final, Hawtin made enough of an impression that she was awarded a development card, which provides funding for athletes with national-team potential. She attended the national team training camp that year but didn't make a veteran team that was preparing for the Paralympics.

"I knew that if I kept doing it, I would get better," Hawtin said. "All the ladies (at the national training camp) worked hard, but they worked hard as a team."

Coming from an individual sport, that might have been the biggest adjustment for Hawtin. But the opportunity she needed to make up for her inexperience arrived in July when Wheelchair Basketball Canada opened its academy in Scarborough and Hawtin was one of the players invited to train year-round. Working with coach Mike Frogley, who coached Canada's men's team to two Paralympic golds, and playing alongside national team members five days a week, Hawtin said her game improved exponentially.

"My ball handling, dribbling the ball up and down the court and just how I see the court, I've improved so much."

It led to the national training camp in Las Vegas. Hawtin met with the coaches at the

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Wheelchair basketball national teamer



Less than two years after a medical condition forced her to retire from wheelchair racing, Melanie Hawtin is now a member of the Canadian women's wheelchair basketball team. | photo courtesy Wheelchair Basketball Canada

end of the camp, expecting to hear how she could continue to develop her game to land a spot on the team in the future. Instead, she was told she would be one of the 12 players who would help Canada try to extend a streak that has seen it win a medal (four gold, two bronze) at every worlds since the tournament was founded in 1990.

And that's when the tears started.

Toronto will host worlds this year

Hawtin still finds it hard to believe. Had surgery not ended her track career, she would have never made the switch to basketball. Though she could physically return to track now, it appears her sprinting days are over.

"In track, I only ever made the development team. I was never on the final national

team. I never went to worlds," she said. "I've already gone above what I ever did in track. Now I see what's possible."

"Melanie's very determined and dedicated," said her mom, Marsha. "And now she's fully committed to basketball."

It's a big year for the Canadian squad, which will host the world championships in Toronto in June.

"It's exciting," Hawtin said, "knowing that everyone will come and see us play."

And if the Canadian women end up with a gold medal draped around their necks, it might be a good idea to have a box of Kleenex on hand.

— Herb Garbutt can be followed on Twitter @Herbgarbutt