

3 Sports, 3 Paralympic Games, 3 Medals: Now Oksana Masters Is A World Champion Too

BY HEATHER RULE | MARCH 09, 2017, 12:30 P.M. (ET)



Oksana Masters will compete at the IPC Nordic Skiing World Cup March 10-15 in PyeongChang, South Korea.

Oksana Masters has competed in three Paralympic Games, each in a different sport, and won three medals in the process. But there's been one line missing on the 27-year-old's résumé: "world champion."

"I was always the athlete that was just right off the top of the podium or third-best or second-best," Masters said.

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Masters won not one but four gold medals at the World Para Nordic Skiing Championships last month in Finsterau, Germany, making her the most successful U.S. woman at the event since the IPC began keeping records. Masters won the sitting cross-country sprint, middle-distance and long-distance races, as well as the biathlon sprint. She also took home a bronze medal in individual biathlon.

The gold medals are amazing accomplishments for her, Master said, because being known as a world champion in these events is something that can stick with her for the rest of her life.

"Hearing quadruple champion is just really crazy," she said after the event. "I'm honestly speechless."

Masters, born in Ukraine and a resident of Louisville, Kentucky, has above-the-knee prosthetic legs as a result of birth defects from radiation poisoning from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. After being adopted at age 7, she moved to the United States and became a rower, eventually winning a bronze medal at the London 2012 Paralympic Games.

She took up Nordic skiing, and at the Sochi 2014 Paralympic Winter Games won a silver and a bronze medal. And after a back injury hindered her abilities as a rower, Masters took up hand cycling and competed at the Rio Games last summer.

Getting involved with skiing was a “right place, right time” situation, Masters said, and she just fell in love with it.

“No other sport is going to put you in the middle of nowhere, where it’s just you and the sound of the snow and the poles skiing,” Masters said. “It’s such a cool feeling.”

She’s already come a long way, said U.S. Paralympics Nordic coach Eileen Carey.

“When she started the sport, she was strong and fit but she struggled with the skill of the sport,” Carey said via email. “Since that time she has dedicated herself to the technical and tactical elements of skiing. She studies other athletes, she analyzes videos constantly and she always has ideas of things to test to improve her skills. She has made huge leaps in these areas over the last few years, and she is not done.”

Masters couldn’t pinpoint anything in particular that was different this time around at worlds, leading to all her gold medals. But her health has been an issue around major competitions in the past. In 2015, she injured her back a week before the world championships, and then she got pneumonia, too.

“So a lot of big events, my body’s been really good at getting sick,” Masters said.

This time it seemed different. Masters was in tip-top shape headed into the world championships and all set to go. Things were going along fine until just before the biathlon sprint, her second-to-last event. Masters didn’t feel quite right as she raced.

Out of nowhere, she ended up getting sick with a virus and kidney stones, which kept her out of two shooting training sessions. Instead of two days of training, she spent that time sleeping and on medication for the severe pain she was in from the kidney stones.

Masters was almost taken to the hospital, but instead spent a night in pain, vomiting and getting some sleep.

So much for coming into the competition with good health on her side.

Carey knew that wouldn’t hold Masters back.

“Oksana uses any type of adversity as motivation,” Carey said. “Any time I have seen her down for any reason, she always rallies back stronger.”

And indeed Masters went on to win another world title, “which was a complete shock” and probably the medal that was the most special, Masters said. This was an event she didn’t necessarily expect to win even before she came down with her illness.

“I went from not sure I could finish any of the races or any of the events in the world championships, to the next day, winning the biathlon sprint distance,” she said. “It was crazy unexpected.”

Masters’ first world title came in her second event, the cross-country sprint. It’s a distance she said she loves and a race she’s continued to improve on each year. It’s also always a tough race because of her class — she’s a LW12, with all her core function — which means she starts at the back of the pack. In past races in this event, she’s also dealt with other challenges, such as broken poles or broken skis.

But this time she won.

“When I crossed the finish line, my coach ran out and just hugged me and said, ‘You did it, you’re a world champion,’” Masters said. “And just hearing those words... it’s crazy. It just felt like a dream.”

One gold medal down, and then the floodgates opened. Masters said it gave her extra motivation to see just how many she could win for Team USA. She said she wanted to push herself to see how many she could win. The answer was four.

It wasn’t just her gold medals that made this competition special.

There was already a bit more excitement for these races in Germany, she said, thanks to the knowledgeable and supportive crowd.

“Not something you get every world cup at all,” she said.

The weather also cooperated, with the sun shining and temperatures being so favorable that Masters said some days she was out on the course in a T-shirt instead of her racing suit.

With that “world champion” title next to her name, Masters is off to PyeongChang, South Korea, training for the Paralympic test events before wrapping up the world cup season in Japan.

She’s also coming into this competition with a clean bill of health. Fingers crossed.

“I’m definitely way better than what I was halfway through worlds,” Masters said.

Heather Rule is a freelance sports journalist and blogger from the Twin Cities. Her work has appeared in various publications. She is a contributor to TeamUSA.org (I) on behalf of Red Line Editorial, Inc. (<http://reditorial.com>)

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