

Resilience in the Face of Adversity May Lead to Olympic Glory



Image Credit: [facebook.com/martinperry](https://www.facebook.com/martinperry)

Meet the man with one fully formed limb and on a passage to become the best player in table tennis. Martin Perry is his name. It is scarcely known in the sporting world, yet his story is truly captivating. As it stands, he sits 15th in the world rankings, so would be forgiven for letting the success go to his head. However, in the short time I spent with him what was on display was modesty and an exuberance for his sport and life.

At the age of 22, the Paisley born athlete has managed to surpass the barriers and stigmas that coincide with his disability. A prosthetic arm attached with a table tennis bat at the tip not only enabled him to play but introduced a game he would fall in love with.

“It’s been a wee bit of a whirlwind”, Martin said. “I’ve only been playing for about six years now. Originally I just thought it was really good fun where I’d play just the odd time here and there, but the more I got into it, it hooked me. I got gripped on it really quickly and I wanted to see how good I could get and it snowballed from there.”

It all started at Drumchapel Table Tennis Club, an institution Martin feels indebted to for getting him involved with the sport. Head Coach at the club, Terry McLernon who had no experience coaching disabled players managed to nurture his game. It was a difficult process but Terry paid homage to Martin’s desire and motivation.

“It was very difficult. We made a bat fit round his arm with Velcro, which would slide off as he got better and faster. Once we found him a prosthetic arm from England, he never really looked back. Martin is the hardest worker you’ve ever seen and his success is down to him and his self-motivation. He plays the same as full-bodied players, the only difference was adapting the bat to the arm. He’s an amazing young man.”

It would shock just about anyone to witness someone overcome a disability such as Martin’s and be able to participate in sport, but he has never let it affect his life.

“Proving people wrong is a motivational drive for me. But also just showing people that things can be done regardless of ability or disability. There is always something out there for you. It’s just a case of whether you’re willing to go find it. It’s not just about proving people wrong, it’s about what can be achieved just through desire to do so. I’ve always had such a positive attitude. I’ve never looked at a challenge and thought, no I can’t do that because I’ve got no hands or one leg.”

In 2012, a trip to watch the Paralympic Games in London was to prove the catalyst in Martin pursuing a professional career.

“We went down and watched Team GB win two medals and from then that is when I decided this is what I want to do. Watching those I regard as heroes, sitting in the crowd and everyone was going crazy, I just thought to myself, wow one day this could be me.”

Now residing in Sheffield working with Team GB as a full-time professional athlete, Martin now refers to his heroes as teammates. Since the move, his talent and ability has soared. Last year, Martin won his very first senior title at the US Open. He joked and laughed when telling an anecdote of how he celebrated.

“It was kind of bittersweet because you want to celebrate as much as you can but on the previous night to the final, I actually fell getting in the bath so I was a bit sore and playing a bit tentatively. Then, in the final set, I fell over again so I was in a lot of pain. When I hit the winning shot, one of my teammates was recording it, ready to give it the big one when I won, but I just collapsed onto the table so I never really got the chance to celebrate.”

This year has seen Martin’s progression advance securing a team gold medal at the European Para Championships and has inevitably incited talk of reaching the Tokyo Paralympics in 2020.

“Qualifications for Tokyo is a massive target for me. Getting there would be a good stepping stone in terms of my development and progress and then I’ll look to go to further Paralympic games in Paris and then LA to hopefully take medals. Getting to the Paralympics is gone from being a dream to a realistic target. It’s not something that’s unachievable anymore, it’s something that I have control over. In regards to winning a medal, I totally believe anything is possible.”

Martin’s aspirations still have some way to go, but his story so far is a token for inspiring others. Before joining up with Team GB he would help coach youngsters looking to take up sport. Encouraging others with disabilities is a huge motivation.

“I tell others similar to me to be passionate whether it’s in sport, arts, creativity, or whatever you want to do. Just be passionate. Your disability will only hold you back as far as you let it.”

That strive to push himself and inspire was further evident when he took part in BBC Children in Need’s Rickshaw Challenge 2013 – a moment that had such a profound effect on him, he got it tattooed on his chest.

“It was an amazing experience. The bike didn’t stop moving. It was 24 hours a day, so when you’re out in the middle of England at half 3 in the morning, it’s pouring with rain in the middle of November and it’s -2 degrees, but you have people cheering you on. That’s an incredible feeling. We raised over 1 and a half million for charity and it’s a journey that will never leave me.”

People with any form of disability who stare at adversity in the face and conquer it will always be meritorious, and Martin deserves exactly that praise. I said his name was scarcely known, but with the way things are panning out we could be seeing a Paralympic champion in the making.