

Katie Holloway - USA

Working to play



Holloway, an outside hitter/opposite who was born without a right fibula and had the lower part of her leg amputated before she was two-years-old, was chosen Best Spiker at the 2012 London Paralympics, where the U.S. won a silver medal and led the USA women's Sitting Volleyball team to Gold at RIO in 2016.

After the successful London Paralympics Katie moved from the team's training facility in Oklahoma to California to begin her job as a recreation therapist. Up to that point in her life, the native of Lake Stevens, Washington, had what you would call a fully structured sports career. She played basketball in college at Cal State Northridge – she was the only player with a prosthetic in the history of NCAA Division I women's basketball and was the Big West Conference's Sixth Woman of the Year twice – and then joined the U.S. Women's Sitting Team and lived and trained as a resident athlete in Oklahoma.

In California, most of the structure disappeared. "When I was living in Oklahoma, it was easy," she says. "And playing college basketball, you go to practice and the environment is built in for you. When I came back to California, I moved into a completely new community. I only knew one person, and that was the person who helped me get the job at the Palo Alto VA, so I had to basically build a structure from square one."

Her first two years in California, she played standing volleyball, which she'd played through her sophomore year in high school before focusing on basketball full-time.

But the timing of the standing game is very different, and she also found that it was too demanding on her body.

After the U.S. team took silver at the 2014 ParaVolley World Championship, she hired a coach, had The USA Women's Sitting Volleyball coach send her multiple volleyballs and got a local gym to agree to let her practice in off hours. That improved her training, but it remained a work in progress.



"The real struggle was getting people to play," she says. "It was a full-time job outside of my full-time job, and it wasn't really working in 2015. I was getting maybe two or three people at practice, including myself and my coach. So, I decided to start travelling around the Bay Area to adult rec leagues. I would ask the director, 'Can I come in for an hour and have one of your courts and some of your people to play sitting with me?' And then I would drive to wherever they were – in Oakland, in the city (San Francisco) – and I would sit down and play. Basically, it was me teaching players how to play sitting, so I wasn't getting the quality training that I would get in Oklahoma. But I was getting to see the ball come over in a six-on-six fashion, whereas before, with only a few people training, I could train skills and certain drills but not much else."

One place she was able to find quality players was Stanford University, which is a just a few miles from where she works. Members of the Cardinal's 2016 NCAA Division I Women's Volleyball Championship team played sitting with her, including middle Inky Ajanaku, outside hitter Ivana Vanjak, opposite Merete Lutz and defensive specialist Kelsey Humphreys. On summer nights, Vanjak would often accompany Holloway to adult rec leagues all over the Bay Area.

"I'd pick her up at Stanford, drive with her to Oakland, then drive her back to Stanford, then drive home (to Belmont) and get there at midnight."

Tiring and complicated as it was, there was one advantage to the patchwork practice schedule. "It was really good for my body not to be training full time," she says. "This is a high-impact sport. You're throwing yourself all over the ground. There's only so much your body can handle. So, for my body to be able to get that rest may have extended my career."

Among Katie's individual honors include being selected Best Spiker of the 2012 Paralympic Games after being Team USA's leading scorer at the 2008 Paralympics. She was chosen the USA Volleyball Female Sitting Athlete of the Year in both 2011 and 2012. She was nominated for the Women's Sports Foundation Sportswoman of the Year in 2013.



Katie has also given back to the sport with the goal of exposing disabled and able-bodied athletes to compete across the country. She has been instrumental in growing the sitting division at the USA Volleyball Open National Championships. Katie serves on the USOC's Athletes' Advisory Council and worked with the Paralympic Governance Working Group.