

Julie Kozun – CAN

A story of transition



Julie Kozun has built a nice little collection of legs. She’s eyeing up a few more with interest.

Kozun, who is from Melfort, lost her left leg below the knee in a lawn-mower accident three years ago at age 15. The 2020 Paralympics hopeful — she’s a sitting volleyball player — has become a prosthetic-leg connoisseur, of sorts.

“I want another one,” grins Kozun, who currently has four, for a variety of applications. “Either the Challenger foot, which has a really big spring thing, or I want one where the foot can extend, for swimming faster. I don’t know which one I want yet.

“You look at all the girls’ legs on my volleyball team, and on the men’s team — you’re looking at their legs, and you kind of pick what you want. My one teammate has a full-out running leg, and it’s pretty cool. I might think about it one day, maybe.”

Kozun’s four prosthetics include a volleyball leg, which she also uses for most day-to-day activities, along with an everyday walking leg, a leg that looks real — “my pretty leg,” she calls it — and a waterproof swimming leg she uses in showers and at the lake.

Julie Kozun competes internationally with the Canadian sitting volleyball team.

The volleyball leg gets a workout when she plays traditional standing volleyball. Sitting volleyball is played without prosthetics, and looks the way it sounds: Players sit on the floor, propelling themselves around, setting, bumping, spiking. The court is smaller, and the net is lower.



Kozun — now an 18-year-old agro-business student at the University of Saskatchewan — is a carded national team member, eyeing that Paralympics berth two years from now.

"I Googled it (shortly after the accident), and I thought 'Well, that looks weird. That does not look fun at all. I don't know if I'll like this,'" Kozun says now. "Sitting on the ground, how do you get on top of the ball? I love to hit in volleyball. But I get more opportunities to do that in sitting, I think.

"The first time I tried it, it was almost faster, and harder. I liked that about it. It was more of a challenge."

She's grown to love the game. Kozun travels to Edmonton once a month and trains with the national squad for a week, then heads home again. She competed in China as a 16-year-old, and has been to Montreal and down into Oklahoma, among other places.

She'll compete with Team Canada at the 2018 World Championships July 15-22 in the Netherlands.



Kozun is the only Saskatchewan player on the national team; she's not aware of other people in the province who play sitting volleyball. It can be a lonely thing, she says: She has no training partner.

Kozun liked volleyball while growing up, and played both on school and club teams. On July 22, 2015, she was at a friend's farm. They decided to make a fire, but first they needed to cut the grass and gather firewood.

Kozun volunteered to get onto the zero-turn riding mower, and went to work.

"I thought my phone was underneath my leg and that it had fallen off the lawn mower," she says. "I was kind of worried, and I was sitting up, trying to look for it, I pushed the thing forward, and it went back, then it went forward again and jerked me over the top. The safety was off, so it didn't turn off."

The next bit is a blur.

"My friend turned off the lawn mower, and then her brother and his friend drove me to Melfort so fast. I have never been in a car that fast before," she says. "We got to the hospital, and they said I wasn't going to lose (the leg), so that calmed me down a lot. They took me to Saskatoon, and I got my first surgery, which basically cleaned it up; they took grass and stuff out of it, and assessed it. (They said) 'We should probably amputate.' I could have kept it, but they said I probably wouldn't walk again."

The leg came off on July 25, several inches below the knee. She was out of the hospital in early August, and had a few weeks to prepare for another school year, this one with a permanently altered body.

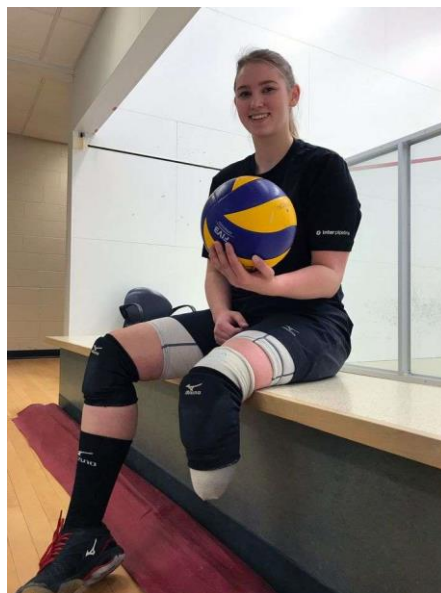
She didn't have a prosthetic yet, and was "crutching around the school a lot, which was super-difficult," she says.

But she adjusted to this new reality, and so did everybody around her.

Meanwhile, Saskatoon-based physiotherapist Bruce Craven taught Kozun to walk again. She signed up for club volleyball, the standing kind, and let her body take the lead.

"We paid for her to play volleyball, and she'd just serve, and sit down," recalled Kozun's mother, Lynne Hanson. "Three weeks later, she would serve and play a couple of balls, then sit down. It ended up being that she would play the whole game. It was amazing to watch; I sat on the side and cried all the time. People would videotape her, because they'd never seen it before. It was pretty amazing."

As Kozun learned to manage her body on the volleyball court, she took a growing interest in the sitting version of the game. A friend alerted her to the sport when she was still in the hospital. Three months later, mere days after getting her prosthetic, she journeyed to Edmonton, met the coach, hit the floor.



And now, after immersing herself — all that travel and all that time, all those games — she can make a definitive pronouncement.

“When I first started sitting, I liked standing more, because I knew the game better,” she says. “But now, I definitely like sitting more. I’m way better at it, I improved a lot this year, and it’s more fun when you know what you’re doing.”

Which she does - with fast-growing confidence.

“In standing volleyball, I’m different than the others,” she said. “I maybe can’t keep up as much. But with (sitting volleyball), we’re all the same. We all have missing limbs. I can keep up, and even get ahead of some people. We’re all the same, and you all have similarities, and you can all relate.”

***“Losing a leg is far from the end of the world”
- Lynne Kozun***

Kozun’s quick and graceful transition, from two legs to amputation, from sudden trauma to that desire to not let life pass her by, is evident in the way she carries herself. She’s not ashamed of the prosthetic leg; it’s part of who she is now, just like her role as a university student, as a daughter, as a carded athlete.

Losing a leg, says her mother, is far from the end of the world: “There’s people out there who continue on doing stuff, and actually enjoy stuff,” Lynne notes.

“I look up to her, because she’s done so well. She never really skipped a beat, and I don’t know if I could do that.”

And if you doubt the mother’s words, consider this comment from Julie.

“I was lucky,” she says. “I had the perfect amputation — 14 inches from the knee is the perfect length. I walk really well, and I have Bruce (Craven) to thank for that. If I didn’t walk so well, I could have more problems. Summer’s kind of hard sometimes, when you go to the lake, because you have to bring your extra swimming leg and stuff like that. But other than that, it doesn’t have a huge effect on everyday things.”

She spreads the word when she can — talking about sitting volleyball with people she thinks can benefit, working as an unofficial ambassador, just like the other people on her team.

“I’d really like younger athletes to know (about sitting volleyball),” she said. “This could honestly happen to anyone. I’ve seen little kids at Champs seminars and stuff like that, and I think it’s really important for kids not to give up; to keep going, and do what they love.”

Right now, sitting volleyball is the only Paralympics-stream sport Kozun competes in. But she's curious, she says, about a certain wintertime game that's caught her eye: Sledge hockey. She's never played hockey, at any level, but she thinks sledge hockey could be right up her alley.

"You get two sticks," she says, "and you slide around on a little sled. I think it looks fun!"