

Pioneer, Paralympic Gold Medalist, Supermom Lora Webster - USA



Lora Webster has been a world pioneer in the sport of sitting volleyball, and she has her sister Lisa to thank for her introduction to volleyball.

Lora would go on road trips to watch her sister play, and in one of those matches when she was seven years old, Lisa's team had match point in the old side-out scoring. After 20 suspenseful minutes, Lisa's team finally won, and Lora was hooked on volleyball.

Lora would play volleyball through elementary school, but she hit a roadblock at age 11 when she was diagnosed with osteosarcoma in her left tibia. She underwent a procedure called rotationplasty to remove the cancerous bone, which included the knee. As part of the surgery, her lower leg was rotated 180 degrees and connected to the remnants of the femur to give her full range of movement allowing her to play sports.

My mom was hesitant [with the rotationplasty] because she was imagining me going on a date when I was older and explaining that my foot is on backward," Webster says. "She was thinking of her teenage daughter, and it was good that she had that perspective, but that wasn't on my radar. I just wanted to retain mobility and activity. I was always outside and playing sports. That was my life, and that's what I wanted to keep – just being able to move."

That setback did not stop Lora. After finishing treatments, she made her standing volleyball middle school team. The family relocated from Lincoln to Phoenix when Webster was 15, and she played a full complement of sports through high school: four years of standing volleyball, track and a year on the varsity diving team. As a starter her senior year, Lora led Cactus High School to the Arizona State High School volleyball championship in 2004 and was honored with the Gene Autry Courage Award.

Instead of playing volleyball in college, Lora focused solely on her new love of sitting volleyball after taking part in the inaugural U.S. camp in February of 2003. Lora was hesitant to try sitting volleyball at first as she thought Paralympic sports were for disabled people. She had spent the years after her surgery making sure she was not considered disabled.



Lora will tell you that the world she and her U.S. Women's Sitting Volleyball Team teammates live in is an alternate universe. She explains it this way:

"We go to the Paralympics, and everybody *at* the Paralympics knows why you're there," she says. "And then you come home and it's like nobody has any idea where you've been for the last three weeks, and they don't know what you just did."

What they did was win the U.S.'s first Paralympic sitting volleyball gold medal ever with a 25-12, 25-12, 25-18 sweep of China in at the RIO Paralympics. That's news that should be known in *our* universe, and the back story is important, too. Players like Webster, who has competed in four Paralympics, has gone to enormous lengths to get to the top of a game that isn't flush with cash. And even with the gold in hand, there's plenty of work ahead for U.S. players and coaches if the program is to maintain the high standard it has set for itself.

Proud describes what Webster's 8-year-old nephew, Jack, felt when his aunt and her teammates won the gold in RIO. Not long after she returned, she was with him at the park. He pointed to a woman they didn't know and said, "Did you tell her you won a gold medal?" Lora smiled and said, "No, honey, she doesn't care." He smiled back and said, "You should tell her!"



Supermom

A photo taken last year by Webster's five-year-old daughter, Madelyn, says it all. Webster is sitting on the floor of the family living room setting a volleyball. Next to her is her three-year-old son, Cole, who has glanced up from a book he's reading to watch Mom. Lying across Webster's lap is the baby, Kyle, who's now a year old. Out of the camera's view but involved as Webster's peppering partner is her husband, Paul Bargellini, an attorney and former team captain of the men's club volleyball team at the University of Delaware.

"That picture pretty much sums up how we did it," Webster says. "The kids had a volleyball in their hands as soon as they could lift their arms up. When they were part of the practice, it made it easier for them to understand what I was doing, and it was more of a family investment. That's how we got through it. We just did it together."

For Webster, family is clearly first, but sitting volleyball is still very much in her sights.

"My biggest concern is that it's right for my family," says Webster, who was honored with the inaugural USA Volleyball All-Time Great Female Sitting Volleyball Player award in 2015. "We knew what we signed up for, but he had a very tough year (in 2016) working full time and being a single parent when I was travelling. If it ever gets to be too much, we'll have that conversation and then that'll be it."

"But the other part is, this is all I know. This is who I am outside of a mom and a wife, so it's hard to retire that part of yourself. But the decision isn't my own anymore. Now there are four other voices to consider."