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## Skier sees silver after reinventing self for third time

Samantha WRIGHT ALLEN / Prince George Citizen  
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Emily Weekes of North Vancouver poses with the silver medal she won in Tuesday's standing para cross country skiing sprint race. - Citizen photo by Samantha Wright Allen

Five long years ago, Emily Weekes gave up on her Olympic dream.

It happened soon after she won bronze in wrestling at the 2009 Canada Summer Games despite sustaining nerve damage to her right arm just weeks before the competition. But, arm taped, she made it to the podium.

By November that year, the tape wasn't enough, and her wrestling career was over.

Now, less than four months into a new sport - standing para cross country skiing - the dream has resurfaced.

"It's my second chance," said Weekes, 24, after winning her second silver medal at the Canada Winter Games, in the para standing classic category. She raced to second on Monday's 2.5-kilometre course and again at Tuesday's 1.2km sprint.

That, after first stepping into a pair of skis in November, despite living at the bottom of Grouse Mountain in North Vancouver.

"I was so funny. In classic I was Bambi on ice," she said of learning to ski less than four months before on terrible snow conditions. It's been a warm winter, and she said much of her training has been on roller skis.

At Tuesday's sprint race, she had a spill on the last hill (with the finish line in clear sight) thanks to warm weather that made for soft snow, which turned crusty on the top as the weather cooled.

"I got caught in the end and had an epic wipeout," said Weekes with a laugh, adding, head hurting, she got up as quickly as she could.

Weekes is used to reinventing herself. After nine years of wrestling, she turned to triathlon.

"I was really antsy, I couldn't do anything. I was like OK, 'Reset, let's try something else I haven't done,'" she said.

She competed in triathlon for five years and even qualified for international-level events.

"I worked my way up from six-minute wrestling goes to 11-plus hours."

Weekes also completed three Ironman races along the way.

But in 2013, her injury had progressed, preventing her from swimming with two arms.

"It's nerve damage in my elbow, shoulder and neck so it's from neck down. It doesn't straighten," said Weekes, adding her right arm is strapped close to her body in a brace because she doesn't have control over its movement when skiing.

Eventually sidelined from biking too, Weekes ended up running stairs to keep up her fitness, which is where her new coaches found her.

Team B.C. coach Tony Chin said she's a coach's ideal athlete.

"She's got something that you can't teach," said Chin, who is also the para-nordic coach of the Nordic Racers. "She's motivated. She's got the commitment, the desire, the competitive spirit."

Already a high-level athlete, Chin said now it's a matter of teaching her the nuances of cross country.

"We see nothing but good things coming from her because we feel we can teach her the techniques of our sport and she will master it and she will definitely represent Canada in the 2018 Paralympics."

For Weekes, she's always been drawn to elite competition.

"I love the lactic acid burn," said Weekes, who trains with Hollyburn Cross Country Ski Club. "I love that where you think you can't push any more and you find you have to really dig deep, mentally and physically. You find out about yourself a bit. You learn so much for life lessons through sport."

Since her injury, she's had to shift how she goes about daily life, and sport has been an important stress outlet.

"I've found sport was probably the easiest getting back into," she said. "Brushing my teeth is probably the hardest thing, or brushing my hair, or writing - I still haven't figured out writing left handed yet."

"You have to figure out different ways of learning, different ways of adjusting."

Like learning to ski only with her left pole, for example. Watching able-bodied skiers with their two poles didn't help, so she watched the motion of the pole and listened to the sound it made on the snow.

"I just mimic that sound."

Weekes said she's happy to be competing with high-calibre athletes again, especially after her experience last month at the Nordic Skiing World Championships in Wisconsin.

"I'd never even thought of para sports, I had a very hard time thinking of myself as a para athlete and I still don't think of myself as a para athlete. I'm just an athlete using one arm."

She plans on moving to Kelowna to pursue cross country in a climate with more reliable snow.

"I'm falling in love with it. I feel like I'm cheating triathlon and cheating on wrestling," she said with a laugh. "I enjoy it because every race is something so new to me."

Weekes will next compete in today's 10km free mass start event.

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