



Meet Toussaint and Einarsson - Young, hungry, new para-rowers

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When World Rowing Cup I gets underway on 1 June in Belgrade, Serbia, para-rowing will open the regatta as the first races for the 2018 international rowing season.

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Louis Toussaint, PR1 Men's single sculls, Belgium, Heats, 2017 World Rowing Championships, Sarasota-Bradenton, USA

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World Rowing caught up with two up-and-coming para athletes; Louis Toussaint, 23, from Belgium and Ebba Einarsson, 18, from Sweden. They are competing in the PR1 single sculls this season. They are both promising young para-rowers, but their journey to para-rowing is quite different.

Toussaint was a competitive able-bodied cyclist. He was training for a time trial when he was 16 and went around a curve. There was a parked truck that he hadn't seen. The resulting accident left him with a broken spine, broken ribs and a host of other injuries. It took Toussaint some time to get back into sport.

"I did hand bike for one year, but I wasn't strong enough yet to train rigorously every day," says Toussaint. He stumbled upon rowing when he and his father went to a sport day organised by the League of Para-Sport in Belgium. Toussaint went to try athletics, but his father started speaking to a rowing coach who thought Toussaint would be the perfect fit.

“The next week I went to try rowing. I was in a boat with three able-bodied people who rowed just with their arms. The next day I came back and then again. I went all five days that week. I told the coach that I wanted to continue and he said ‘oh, that’s good, because I already ordered your boat,’” Toussaint says laughing.

Toussaint, however, was not entirely convinced about rowing.

“When I started, I thought, this is going to be so boring, really, really boring. You can only go straight and it’s always the same movement. But actually, it is so much broader than that. Each rowing stroke is different, depending on the conditions, on the water. It was eye-opening for me. When I started rowing, I discovered a sport and a pleasure that anyone who doesn’t row, can’t know,” Toussaint says.



Ebba Einarsson of Sweden para PR1 W1x

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Einarsson’s introduction to rowing was completely different. She needed no convincing of the beauty of rowing because she was already a rower. Einarsson rowed as an able-bodied rower for the Swedish junior national team. As she puts it, “I rowed, like normal, for ten years.”

Last July, just ten months ago, Einarsson came home from work and felt terrible. She thought she just needed to rest, but had trouble falling asleep when she climbed into bed.

“When I woke up, it was all gone,” she says. It was a bleed in her spinal cord, an extremely rare condition. “When we went to the hospital, they didn’t know what it was actually. It just came from nowhere, I couldn’t have done anything about it, it just came,” Einarsson says.

As she began to recover, Einarsson immediately thought of rowing. “I actually said to a newspaper, I don’t care about walking, but I want to row again,” says Einarsson. Three weeks before the 2018 Para International Regatta in Gavirate (ITA), she got into a boat again and took her first strokes.

“It was so emotional,” she says, “It was good feelings, of course, but also bad. I get sad and frustrated, but I am also happy because I can actually be on the water again. That’s the special part.”

Both Einarsson and Toussaint recognise the similarity between para-rowing and able-bodied rowing. Toussaint trains with the national team in Belgium.

“I follow the training programme for the national team. I train with World Champions. Even if on the water, I just see them pass by me, that allows me to learn a lot of things, such as the catch and the

movement of the oar, which is quite similar. The rest of the stroke is different, but the entry in the water, the movement through the water and getting the blade out of the water is the same," Toussaint says.

For Einarsson, she is able to take the technique she had used for ten years and apply it well. "I have good technique from my past, but I need to be quicker at the catch and keep the blade in the water. Pararowing and able-bodied rowing really should be equal. The rowing is the same. The body gets exhausted, that's the same," Einarsson says.

Einarsson is just starting out in her international career and says she doesn't have a plan yet. But if all goes well, she would like to continue competing.

Toussaint, after having competed at the 2017 World Championships is further along in his rowing career. This year he plans to build on what he has learned and continue to make improvements both physically and technically. Toussaint is set to compete in Belgrade next week. He will race in the para PR1 men's single sculls against the best in the world including World Champion Erik Horrie of Australia and Paralympic Champion from Ukraine, Roman Polianskyi.