

game bits

Personal Pride

Lakeshore Foundation's Jeff Underwood helps athletes excel

BY BENJAMIN GLEISSER



THE 2020 SUMMER OLYMPICS & Paralympic Games are two years away, but a ferocious basketball team is practicing like the games are next week.

A player grabs a quick pass; while dribbling with one hand, he uses the other to quickly wheel his chair down court and stops just short of the basket, where he smoothly launches a two-point layup. Watching from the sidelines, Jeff Underwood claps for the fellow who made the bucket, then gazes off at another part of the gym, where a young woman—another Paralympic hopeful—is doing laps in her track chair. “It’s clear to me the power sports has to transform lives,” said Underwood, president and chief executive officer of Lakeshore Foundation.

Lakeshore is an official United States Olympic

Committee (USOC) training site for Olympic and Paralympic athletes. The Birmingham-based nonprofit serves more than 10,000 people with disabilities each year by providing fitness, sports and recreation programs, as well as conducting research on athletes and adapted sports, and championing advocacy programs. Lakeshore’s facilities include a gymnasium with courts for basketball, rugby and goalball—a form of soccer played by visually impaired athletes. There is also a track, an aquatics center, outdoor archery and shooting ranges, and a nearby lake where athletes can hone their canoeing and water skiing skills. Lakeshore also offers nutrition instruction, and a sports psychologist is available to help anyone deal with emotional needs.

“We especially love to see youngsters get

Below: Jeff Underwood has had a profound impact on sport and recreation for people with disabilities through the Lakeshore Foundation. Fellow UA alum, Jennifer Schuble, is a three-time Paralympian and credits Lakeshore for her success.



involved in sports at the youth level,” said Underwood, who has headed Lakeshore for 26 years. “Children with disabilities may not have the opportunity to play sports in school, but Lakeshore gives them the chance to pursue those activities and have an active life, and gives them the ability to have lofty goals—like being a Paralympian and representing their country on the world stage.”

After graduating from The University of Alabama’s College of Commerce and Business Administration in 1974, Underwood earned a master’s in public administration at Auburn University and held a number of public service jobs. Previously he served as a Homewood, Alabama, city councilman, president of the Homewood Board of Education, Alabama state senator and a legislative assistant to former U.S. Congressman Ben Erdreich. While working as the associate director of community affairs for The University of Alabama at Birmingham Comprehensive Cancer Center, he learned that Lakeshore was looking for someone to help it expand its outreach services.

“I saw the opportunity to be involved in an operation I believed in,” he said. “In the early days, the foundation was only a rehab hospital, but it had a long history of being involved in sport and recreation for people with disability. When I came on board, I wanted to impact the community by creating more programs that would help people with disability be more independent.”

Jennifer Schuble, a three-time Paralympian in cycling and five-time medalist, credits Lakeshore for her success on the track. “The Lakeshore Foundation is how I found out about the Paralympic Games,” said Schuble, who graduated from UA with her bachelor’s in 2001 and her master’s in 2004. “I continue to work out in the fitness room on my coordination, balance and strength. Before I started working on my balance, I couldn’t do a standing start out of the gates. I’m now one of the fastest women in the world out of the start gate.”

Schuble continues racing with the U.S. Paralympic cycling team. Her goal: getting more Lakeshore athletes involved in cycling.

Another UA alum, Mary Allison Milford Cooke, ’09 BA, watched a youth wheelchair basketball tournament at Lakeshore when she was 12 years old. Inspired by the event, she began working out there and, at the end of her freshman year at the Capstone, tried out for the U.S. Wheelchair Basketball Team. She won gold with the team at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The team placed fourth at the 2012 games in London.

“Lakeshore has had an immeasurable impact on my personal, professional and athletic life,” said Cooke, who retired from competition in 2013 but stayed involved with the sport, coaching Lakeshore’s youth wheelchair basketball teams and the Cambodian Women’s Wheelchair Basketball Federation national team.

Today, Cooke works at Lakeshore as a communications coordinator, “spreading our message that there’s no physical limit to human achievement,” she said.

Lakeshore athletes speak highly of Underwood, and their kind words mean more to him than the many awards he has won, including the Amazing Partner Award from the USOC, the first non-profit Live the Dream Award from the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, and the Friends of Children Award from Children’s Hospital of Alabama. Honoring his work, the USOC Paralympic Advisory Council named him Chef de Mission for the U.S. Paralympic Team for the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games. He is currently a member of the Local Organizing Committee for the 2021 Birmingham World Games.

Before heading back to his office, Underwood gives the athletes an appreciative look. “It’s all about personal growth and personal pride,” he said.

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