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The “Tony Rule”

There was no need for introductions. Not for me. The famous face next to me calmly settled his body into the starting blocks, preparing for the 100-meter race. To me, the face was exactly as it looked in the magazines. As the starting gun rose, the eyes of the famous face stared ahead, intense, confident. The gun fired. A race with destiny began.

The famous face crossed the finish line before I was even halfway through the race. Dennis Oehler, the man with the rugged, Hollywood looks, the man the other runners had pointed at while whispering, “There he is,” turned and walked calmly back to the finish line. His hand shot out to greet me as I plodded up the track.

It’s a scene a 16-year-old kid would never forget. And one I never wanted to repeat.

The race that day in the summer of 1989 was the first between me and Oehler. In fact it was my very first race in an amputee competition, the result of my crazy determination to run in a major race combined with the equally crazy determination of my high school German teacher, Susan Hall, to raise the money necessary to get me to Tampa Bay. She had succeeded, and the rest was up to me.

Before the meet was over I justified the faith of those who had helped pay my way—and even surprised myself—by winning three gold medals. But what stuck in my mind was not the victories; it was that race against Dennis Oehler, even though he had run only for the purposes of exhibition, and his “win” didn’t officially count. To me, it mattered. Ohler was recognized as the top name in the ultimate competition for disabled athletes, the Paralympics, and the top name of disabled sprinters in general. A double winner at the Seoul Paralympics the previous year, and a world record holder, he had brought credibility to this sport. He was also one of the first disabled athletes to make a living off product endorsements and appearance fees. He was The Face of disabled athletes.

I kept thinking about how he had reached out to greet me as I straggled over the finish line. Such a confident gesture, so smooth and self-assured. A gesture that said, *Sorry, but this couldn’t really have ended any other way, now could it?*

I thought, *someday* I’ll *be the one walking back to the finish line to greet* you.

Dennis Oehler became my focus.

Another life-changing event occurred during that meet in Tampa: I was approached by Van Phillips, the originator of Flex-Foot, Inc. His company manufactured prosthetics made of light-weight carbon graphic fibers, including a J-shaped "foot" he had designed especially for running. He asked if I would like to use a pair of these feet at an upcoming national amputee meet in New York.

It was like being asked if I wanted to own a Ferrari as well as my bicycle. I said...well, *yes*.

The Flex-Foot changed my running style entirely. Each toot consisted of a seven-inch-long carbon graphite strip screwed into a carbon graphic prosthetic leg that fit snugly over my real leg. With spiked track shoes secured to the angled base of the strips, I suddenly found myself capable of a developing a normal running style, complete with recoil, instead of the motion of someone running atop tin cans.

In sprinting, the key to speed is not how fast you lift your knees—it's how hard you push off the ground. I hadn't had much of a push-off before...but now, with the Flex-Feet, I did.

Four weeks after the Tampa Bay race, my Flex Feet and I competed in the junior division of a national amputee meet in New York City. Oehler was not involved in this race, but he was there, anyway—in two pictures I hung on the wall of my dorm room at Hofstra University where I stayed prior to the meet. I'd clipped the images from a magazine. One showed Oehler in midstride in front of a blurry background, creating the illusion of motion. The other was of him working out with Carl Lewis.

Those photos became my prod, my motivation. Whenever I stepped into my dorm room, there they were. I fixated on them. I wanted to be the one in the ads. I wanted to be the one other runners pointed at while whispering, "There he is."

At the time, there was no reason for me to believe I could beat Oehler, let alone supplant him as the famous face in the magazines. Even with the help of Flex-Foot, my speed in the 100 meters was nearly three seconds slower than Oehler's, which is liked getting lapped in a 1600-meter race. To beat Oehler, even to *think* I could beat Oehler, was wildly unrealistic.

But then, so was thinking I could run track at all with no hands or feet.

I was still a high school kid, of course, which caused a problem for someone determined to compete at the national level. Although I had access to the school track year-round, the support system—coach, team, equipment—vanished at the end of the school year. I now had a new pair of feet for running, but no way to fully take advantage of them. I needed help.

Once again Ms. Hall came to the rescue. She introduced me to Julie Rowe, the daughter of a high school football coach who had, herself, been teaching high school

track and volleyball for 28 years. In all that time, Rowe said, she had never experienced anyone like me. Later she told me that the first time she saw me running on the cinder track, jolting along on what looked like a pair of stilts, she felt "wonder."

She said my situation offered a coach so many new variables to work with, so many unknowns—the mechanics of it, the technology of it. But she admitted that if we were to be successful, I'd have to teach her as much as she taught me. "We're going to have to learn what to do together. I've never trained anyone without feet before."

And learn together we did. Five days a week, she and I met at the track for up to two hours per workout. There were no exceptions. If it was raining, I ran in the wet and she coached from under an umbrella. My motivation was simple: if I wanted to get better, if I wanted to defeat a man like Dennis Oehler, I had to work harder than anyone else. Rowe's motivation was even simpler: whatever *I* was willing to do, *she* was willing to do.

So she pushed me like she pushed all her athletes. There was never a notion that she had to coddle me. She never offered an expression of pity, nor would I have accepted one if she had. "I don't think its Tony's disability that calls people's attention to him," she later said. "If he were a surly kid with a chip on his shoulder, I wouldn't have been too gung-ho to work with him. But he was so enthusiastic, so motivated, that it wasn't work for me at all."

Good thing, too; she coached me without charge.

As much as my Flex Feet improved the mechics of my running, they offered their own challenges. First, they had to be adjusted. If they were too stiff, they didn't give me enough spring; if too soft, they generated so much recoil I went *boing, boing, boing* down the track.

Eventually, after a lot of experimenting, we found the proper settings for me.

But then we had to adjust my workouts as well. Before the Flex-Feet, I had run as if attached to a pair of two-by-fours, with my quadriceps doing almost all the work. It was very fatiguing. With the Flex Feet, I had to learn to run all over again—the right way.

The USA/Mobil Outdoor Track and Field Championships were held on Randle's Island in New York in 1991. This was a very high-profile affair, the first-ever mix of The Athletics Congress national track championships with an exhibition amputee race. I was there, and so was Dennis Oehler. He was in his element. With all the media coverage and hordes of fans who had come to see sprinters like Carl Lewis compete, it was an ideal showcase for him.

But not, most likely, for me. During the previous year I had faced Oehler at two previous meets, the last one only ten months earlier in Bowling Green, Ohio. That

had been our first race against each other in the senior division, and he had beaten me in the 100 meters by almost a full second, demolishing my time of 12.7 seconds. To call me a long shot in this race would be a major understatement. I had just graduated from high school two months before, and although by then Rowe and I had cut two full seconds off my 100-meter time, I still had never run the distance in under 12 seconds. That left me nearly a half-second behind Oehler's world record.

He probably wasn't thinking about me at all as he settled himself into his starting position, and I settled into mine.

Starts had always been the weakest part of my race. Prior to working with Rowe, I had begun every race from a standing position—body upright, knees bent—the pose usually taken by middle-distance runners, who don't need an explosive launch. Sprinters, on the other hand, use the "sprinter's start," coiling down with the balls of their feet planted in starter's blocks and their upper body supported on both arms. But I couldn't do that. Without hands, my arms weren't long enough to reach the track. So I stood up to start.

Rowe insisted that that wouldn't do. Not if I wanted faster times. I had to get down in a four-point stance, period.

It was my father who came up with the solution—his own simple, elegant invention: a pair of one-gallon cans stuffed with foam rubber and wrapped in the same material the track was made of. When I placed the cans on the track a yard to so in front of the foot blocks, I could lean down and brace my upper body on the cans, positioning myself in the same stance as every other sprinter.

So much for the starting position, but another problem was not so easily solved. One weakness of the Flex Feet was that when I pushed back on them, they had to bend and build up stored energy before releasing to propel me forward. This created a noticeable hesitation before I came out of the blocks—especially when I was competing against runners, like Oehler, who had one full limb to push off with.

Rowe and I had worked on it, but the fact remained...my starts were the weakest part of my game.

But I didn't think about that as I settled my prosthetic feet in the blocks and my arms on the paint cans. I didn't think about all the hard training I'd done, all the people who were pulling for me. I didn't think about my previous losses to Oehler. I didn't think about anything, in fact, except *this* race, *this* opportunity, *this* moment.

When the gun went off, I exploded out of my stance—and for once I found myself ahead of everyone else...except Oehler. We matched one another stride for stride down the track, arms and legs pumping as we left the rest of the pack behind.

Then the unexpected happened. As we reached the halfway mark, I began to pull ahead. With every step the gap widened...until I crossed the finish line a half-second ahead of Dennis Oehler.

I had won. I had upset the world record holder, "*the face*," the man in all the advertisements.

Oehler stumbled crossing the finishing line. He looked dazed, surprised. It was his first loss in seven years of racing. I walked back and shook his hand—a fantasy moment come true.

"I don't know how to feel," I told reporters later. "Ask me when I wake up."

Although our times were wind-aided, I finished with an official time of 11.74, my personal best by nearly half a second. Oehler's time was 12.46, but he wasn't ready to concede that it meant anything important. In his best Arnold Schwarzenegger voice, he said, "I'll be back."

He was wrong. I would never lose to Dennis Oehler again.

That's not to say our rivalry was over—in fact, in important ways it had just begun. I hadn't really thought about what losing would mean to a man like Oehler. It's been estimated that there are between 350,000 and 400,000 leg amputees in this country, spending about $800 million to a $1 billion a year on prosthetics. Manufacturers once pitched their products only to doctors and prosthetics, but not anymore. There is now direct marketing to the public—and one-legged runners are in demand to make the sales pitch.

Oehler, with his outgoing personality and jockish looks, had a lot of commercial appeal. He earned money from numerous endorsements and motivational talks. He had even made a workout video for amputees.

But endorsement offers and speaking engagements hinge on performance, on winning. Oehler had lost his right leg in a car accident shortly after signing a professional soccer contract in 1984. It must have taken superhuman determination for him to have not only risen above his disappointment, but to have created an entirely new athletic career and to have dominated it for so long. But now he was in danger of losing everything he had worked for...again.

The danger was real. The Mobil Outdoor Championships would prove to mark the beginning of the end of Oehler's career, and the beginning of mine. In a span of 11.74 seconds I had gone from being just another challenger to being the one to beat.

One year later—September, 1992, Barcelona, Spain: The Paralympics, the premier international event for amputees and other disabled athletes. I swept the 100 and 200 meter races, set two world records, and handed Oehler a pair of bitter defeats.

Afterward, reporters quote him as saying, “I guess if I cut off my other leg and I was seven feet tall, I could do it, too.”

Three years later, 1995, I was scheduled to compete in the one and only qualifying race for the upcoming Atlanta Paralympics Games. Prior to my first event, I was told I needed to be reexamined before competing. The doctors wanted to take some measurements of me.

“What for?”

“There’s a new rule that regulates the height you can be with your prosthetics on.”

I shrugged and agreed to the examination. Why not? I had gone through these procedures before and always received the nod.

But this time, after the doctors measured me, they said I was ineligible to race. I was one inch too tall, they said.

I didn’t know what to do. If I raced, I’d be disqualified. If I didn’t race, I’d be ineligible for the Atlanta Paralympics. Crushed, I dropped from the race, my chance of repeating as the 100- and 200-meter champion in the Paralympics apparently struck down by what came to be known as the “Tony Rule.”

The evening prior to the race, I bumped into Dennis Oehler at a meeting for all the athletes competing. He wished me good luck. When I didn’t respond, he said, “Aren’t you racing?”

I shook my head. “I’m disqualified based on my height.”

“You’re kidding. Who in the heck would have done that?”

The next day, Oehler won the race easily.

I protested the ruling. In hopes of gaining ammunition for my case, I consulted a prosthetist and told him about the formula used to bar me from the race. After he measured the sprinters on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology track team, he found that the same formula that that had barred me from running in Cambridge would have required the disqualification of 19 of the 20 MIT sprinters.

If these findings weren’t a strong enough argument to overturn the Tony Rule, I also discovered the identity of the one person who had insisted that the height limitation be applied to me: Dennis Oehler.

Apparently a former coach of Oehler’s had called a doctor in New York and insisted that he come up with a rule restricting a runner’s height. He told the doctor to make sure the restriction would apply to Tony Volpentest.

I learned that of all the athletes signed up to compete in that race, I was the only one who got measured. How could I doubt that the rule was created specifically for me?

My protest went before Bob Wade, a member of the international board of the Paralympics. Wade quickly called a special meeting, and the decision banning me from running was overturned.

That was a gratifying result, of course—but in order to avoid future challenges, I had my prosthetics shortened by nearly an inch.

Another qualifier for the Atlanta Paralympics was approved for me, and even with my lowered stature, I easily qualified.

The irony is that my shorter prosthetics actually made me *faster*. Although the missing inch shortened my stride, it quickened its frequency.

But I hadn't heard the last of the Tony Rule. A week before the Atlanta Paralympics, two doctors from Sweden insisted on measuring me to prove I was within the permitted limits. They told me the information would be to my benefit, a hedge against further protests. I consented.

Wade later told me that after the measurements were complete, the doctors promptly filed a formal protest against my height. The same two doctors who had told me they would be using their data to protect me were actually using it *against* me. Bob Wade told them there'd be no protests against me, period. If Bob hadn't been there, there is a good chance I could have been disqualified...again.

But I wasn't disqualified, and the path was now clear for me to become the most recognized disabled athlete in the world.

I gladly acknowledge the fact that it was Dennis Oehler who brought respectability and public attention to the Paralympics. No one can ever take that away from him. But one thing is true for all athletic champions, amputee or not: the end of their reign automatically means the beginning of someone else's. Oehler, at 36, was well past his prime. Even before Atlanta, I had beaten him more than once. My dream of being the one who turned to greet the other racers as they crossed the finish line had come true. I was the world's fastest leg amputee sprinter.

Yet in a way, Oehler was a victim of his own success. If I had gained the crown by beating anyone else, it would have been a minor victory, known only within the disabled racing community. But defeating the current champion, the Face of the sport, the man seen in all the ads and testimonials...that guarantees the victor instant credibility.

Despite the Tony Rule fiasco, I have no hard feelings toward Oehler...well, perhaps a twinge of resentment. But in any event, the rivalry has lost its luster. For a rivalry to exist there has to be some kind of perceived threat. By the time I ran around the track in 1992 at Barcelona, draped in the American flag after winning a gold medal in the 100 meters, no one was even close to beating me—including Dennis Oehler.

Of course, I'm not fooling myself. Just as I took the crown from Oehler, someone is already working offstage, dreaming of taking the crown from me. And eventually, that someone will succeed. For an athlete, time and age remain the enemies, no matter who you are.