

Jolan Wong



Setting Up Canada's WOMEN'S Sitting Volleyball Team

By Emily Blackborow

Hailing from Pembroke, Ontario, Jolan Wong plays the position of libero for the Canadian women's sitting volleyball team. Also a coach, a ParaSport® Ontario athlete ambassador and a full-time homeschool teacher to her two children, she does still find free time to enjoy yoga, running, sunsets, reading, travelling, and going to coffee shops.

Her undeniable skill and leadership on the court has earned her National Team captain honours as well as the title of "Best Receiver" at the 2015 Parapan Am Games in Toronto. Jolan has also been presented with an MP Commendation in her local riding in recognition of her leadership and inspiration for Canadians of all abilities.

Jolan played a variety of sports at a young age but always had a passion for volleyball. She lost her right leg to bone cancer in high school which led her to a variety of parasports which she began playing at age 16. She started with cycling. At the same time, her standing volleyball coach reached out

Photo by Art by Agata



Photo courtesy of Jolan Wong

to Volleyball Canada to see if Jolan could try out for the sitting volleyball team, a women's program that was just beginning in Canada. Jolan was just 18 when she secured her spot on the squad and has been a key team player and promoter ever since.

At the time that Jolan joined the team, the women's sitting volleyball program was considered a grass-roots movement by many. Officially, Canada's national program launched in 2008, the year Jolan joined. Admittedly, Canada was quite late to the game considering Sitting Volleyball has been part of the Paralympics since 1980.

The sport itself is very inclusive. There is no need for customized equipment and it provides a game where para-athletes and able-bodied athletes can compete on a level playing field... or court, more specifically. Jolan shares that she chose

volleyball over other sports that she was competing in as a young woman because it was so adaptable. "We could take off our legs and just use what we have." And it was a program on the rise and she wanted to be a part of it.

Jolan has consistently used her love of sitting volleyball to encourage others to play, over the years helping to build the teams she has led. Her positive impact on the lives of many para-athletes, not just those whom she inspired to be her teammates, can not be overstated.

Katelyn Wright was just 12 years old when she was a patient in the hospital. The young girl from Edmonton shared a room with Jolan, who is from Alberta originally as well. Although they didn't talk much at the time, the girls reconnected at a sport clinic years later. They exchanged emails, with Jolan asking Katelyn if

she would be interested in playing with the Canadian women's sitting volleyball team. Katelyn had never played volleyball but jumped at the chance to play a new sport and be part of a team. Katelyn appreciates that introduction to parasports as one of the best things to have ever happened to her.

In high school, Amber S kyrpan played for the senior standing volleyball team. A member of an opposing team who had since graduated and was now playing sitting volleyball remembered Amber. That player was Jolan, who asked her coach to reach out to Amber's coach about playing sitting volleyball too. Although hesitant at first, Amber was 15 when she gave sitting volleyball a chance. She immediately embraced the sport and is now a Paralympian.

During Heidi Peter's recovery at the Edmonton Children's Hospital

“So, it’s not just working for yourself, but working for everyone to reach a common goal. And it’s little things that I do in my life that can have a big impact in someone else’s life.”

Jolan was a volunteer there. Just like Jolan, Heidi was a volleyball player who lost her leg to cancer at a young age. Jolan was already a member of the women’s sitting volleyball team when she introduced herself to Heidi. One year later, in 2013, Heidi tried out and joined the Canadian team.

What has kept Jolan on the team for nearly a decade? What keeps drawing her to competition? It’s a combination of passion for the sport, a love for her team and supporters, and her commitment to a greater goal for herself.

During the pandemic it has been a tremendous challenge for many high-performance para-athletes – especially those on teams – to remain as committed as Jolan has been to her sport. Team sports have become decentralized. National teams have players in different provinces training at different times, with funding to travel only once a month for a collective practice. Some teams have adapted by creating “training bubble camps” where players are grouped together with one to four teammates in the same hotel and transportation vehicles, training with their coaches at a safe distance. The nature of the times and the costs associated with training athletes for international competition has been a huge barrier and a deterrent for athletes looking to compete overseas.

However, the Canadian sitting volleyball women proved to themselves in their 2020 Tokyo qualifiers that they had the potential and the momentum to reach the podium and they were not going to let the

pandemic pessimism slow them down. Jolan and the team knew the competition would be tough, but the team set their goals high regardless.

The team was spread out from Ontario to British Columbia and previously trained together in Alberta. But the consistently changing travel restrictions and protocol associated with Covid-19 prevented the team from training together in preparation for the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games (postponed to 2021). They qualified for the 2020 Games on home soil in Halifax just before the lockdowns began in early 2020. And then they were unable to train together. They stayed in touch online and took on responsibilities of checking in on fellow teammates and supporting each others’ independent training regimens.

Jolan, as her teammates and family and many in the wider parasport community well know, is a highly dedicated para-athlete on a number of levels. In her words, her motivation comes from the sense of commitment to the greater good of the team. “It’s about all the little pieces that we must put together to eventually reach the big goal, which isn’t just a personal goal. It’s a team goal, right? So, it’s not just working for yourself, but working for everyone to reach a common goal. And it’s little things that I do in my life that can have a big impact in someone else’s life.”

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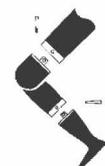


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