

Serving Dreams, Smashing Limits

Inside Paralympic tennis player Maylee Phelps' rise to stardom and becoming a role model

By Lily Crane



Photos by Mark Reis

The tennis ball is softly tossed in the air. As the racket strikes the ball overhead, the wheelchair rolls backward, carving into the clay court. Maylee Phelps then pushes her wheels in the direction of the net, preparing for the return.

Phelps is an American Paralympian who was born with spina bifida, a condition where her spinal cord did not form correctly, which often results in damage to both the spinal cord and other nerves. Despite the adversity she faced at a young age, undergoing multiple surgeries, she managed to wear a smile through everything. At the age of two, her parents, Rebecca and Mike Phelps, adopted her from China and brought her home to the United States.

“The things that she had to overcome,” says Rebecca, “...We knew that she was a very strong child.”

Phelps and her seven siblings, four of whom were also adopted, were encouraged from a young age to play sports. Rebecca says that the family saw the results that playing wheelchair basketball had on her son, Sam David Phelps, who is 13 months younger than Phelps and also has spina bifida.

Shriners, a children’s hospital in Portland, Oregon, was holding a clinic at St. John’s Racket Club in 2017. Phelps, who is generally very shy, surprised the family by saying she wanted to try it.

"It's literally like watching a standup player, probably even better, because we have to work twice as hard because we can't use our legs, so we have to push while also hitting," says Phelps. "We had to really build our upper body and core just to do that."

Rebecca and Mike dropped her off at the Shriners clinic, not far from their home. When the couple returned to pick her up, one of the coaches pulled them aside for a talk.

"We were looking at each other, going, 'Okay, Maylee is like the model kid. She never gets in trouble. What is going on? Is she hurt? What's wrong?'" says Rebecca. "They said, 'I really see potential in her.'"

Phelps told her parents that she enjoyed the clinic and wanted to play again. From there, she started playing on Sundays with a group mostly consisting of adult men before she shifted to receiving private lessons.

The following year, Phelps' family drove over an hour south to Salem, Oregon, four to five times a week for her to train with her coach, John Devorss. Other athletes would drive from out of town to work with Devorss. The former University of Oregon tennis player coached both stand-up and wheelchair tennis athletes over the past couple of decades, including three-time American Paralympic gold medalist David Wagner.

"Everything was about knowing that my job was to get her to become a professional in terms of moving to Orlando, where the USTA headquarters is, and really prepare her for the next step," says Devorss.

Devorss eventually sat down with the Phelps family and told them that if Phelps wanted to approach the sport with intentions of playing at a high level, like he believed she could, it was time to shift gears.

Rebecca and Mike gave their daughter space for a couple of months to think about what she wanted from her future in tennis. Finally, she told her parents she wanted to be a Paralympian.

"From that day forward, she has not wavered," says Rebecca.

With the help of Devorss, Phelps worked on everything from her serve, forehand, backhand, and volleys, always finding ways to improve.

"To know the work we put in together is just the beginning — all the things that we would talk about when she was 13 and 14 — it doesn't surprise me when I see her have success," says Devorss. "I think she can be a Grand Slam champion. I feel that she can be a gold medalist. I've seen her do things on the tennis court that she hasn't yet shown everybody yet, and I know it's coming."

As Phelps' practice schedule intensified, her tournament appearances also grew. By age 15, Phelps achieved the No. 3 ranking in U.S. juniors. Then she had a standout year in 2023 when she reached the World No. 1 junior wheelchair ranking in January. She was only 16. By September, she won the junior U.S. Open doubles title alongside French player Ksénia Chasteau.

Two months after her junior Grand Slam title came the next big step in her journey: the 2023 Parapan American Games.

“It was a chance for Maylee to kind of show everybody who and what type of a player she is, especially in the bigger moments,” says Devorss.

Phelps has teamed up with several doubles partners over the course of her career. One of the most successful pairings was with Dana Mathewson, who was the first American woman to win a Grand Slam title in wheelchair tennis — Wimbledon 2022 — and someone whom Phelps looked up to. The two had a successful run in Santiago, Chile. Mathewson expresses that she didn't necessarily know what to expect for the doubles slate of the Parapan American Games, given that Phelps was still new to the sport.

But the doubles pair played their way into the gold medal match in Chile. The opposing Brazilian duo controlled the first set in a 6-3 victory.

“I remember we were still laughing,” says Mathewson. “We were still enjoying ourselves on the court. I think that's why we're able to turn that around.”

The duo kept fighting. Phelps and Mathewson took the second 6-2 and ended up forcing a champions tiebreak.

With the tiebreak score at 9-3, the mossy-green tennis ball just ticked the thin white baseline to stay in play before Phelps could hit a return. The Brazilian doubles team on the opposing side of the court high-fived each other in celebration as they cut the tiebreak deficit.

Phelps stayed level-headed and showed neither frustration nor arrogance under her black Nike visor. She peered through her glasses to the other side of the net. Phelps then rolled her wheelchair to the left corner of the court, awaiting a forehand return that would never come.

“You would think that because [she’s] such a great player that you have a lot of pressure on yourself to do better and have higher expectations,” says Phelps. “But because she’s so good, I could just swing freely.”

Mathewson sliced a return to the opposite corner of the court. The ball took one bounce and then soared out of reach of the opposing pair's rackets. Mathewson raised her arms into the air in celebration, and Phelps increased the speed of her arms to push her wheels in Mathewson's direction. Phelps smiled and tossed her racket to the ground. They shook off the first-set loss to clinch a Gold Medal on the red clay court at the 2023 Parapan American Games.

For Phelps, November 2023 teased the opportunity for future success.

When Phelps realized she was good enough to play tennis professionally, she took the 2028 L.A. Paralympics as an attainable goal. Her accomplishments in the first five years of her playing career spoke for themselves, and the goalpost shifted to Paris in 2024.

Finally, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) revealed the team heading to Paris on August 12, 2024. Phelps’ name was on the list as the wildcard card player, meaning she’d play doubles.

There was one emotion stronger than the others when she heard the news. “It was like relief,” says Phelps. “I started switching my mindset to ‘now it's just the training needs to happen.’”

The event was bigger than Phelps imagined, feeling 10 times bigger than Chile. Rebecca emotionally recalls the first time Team USA invited Phelps to a larger tournament: the Junior World Team Cup. She says that she’ll never forget when she saw “M. Phelps” and “USA” on the back of the tracksuit her daughter received for the competition. Rebecca compared those emotions to when Phelps made the Paralympic team, calling it “mind-boggling” that she got to compete in the pinnacle of any athlete's dream at such a young age.

“I was taking pictures of her with the Paralympics in the background, and there she was with her ‘USA’ on her back,” says Rebecca. “It was just like, I cannot believe... she is 17 years old, and she is in Paris, playing in the Paralympics.”

Phelps reunited with Mathewson in Paris. But this time, the duo lost the first round in a 6-10 tiebreaker. She made the second round in singles but her tournament ended there, following a loss to China's fourth-seeded Ziyang Wang.

While the experience was another preview of what may lie further down the line for Phelps, who will be 21 years old in 2028, it also provided the opportunity for her to see the fan potential of wheelchair tennis.

“It is the Paralympics, but normally at Grand Slams, women's matches — and some men's matches — there's a very low crowd. But here it was. It was packed, like a huge stadium,” says Phelps. “Everybody was just watching all the wheelchairs, doesn't matter the ranking or anything, which I thought was amazing.”

Rebecca says that the Paris crowd was unlike anything she'd seen before and says that there was only standing room in the bleachers.

In standup tennis, the Miami Open, Indian Wells, and Cincinnati Masters are the main tournaments that take place in the U.S. outside of the U.S. Open. In wheelchair tennis, the competitions for athletes in the U.S. are even more sparse.

“You have to travel so far, especially for wheelchair athletes,” says Phelps. “Europe is the better place to go for tournaments because the U.S. just doesn't have enough athletes or higher-level athletes. So it's harder to get a good player or to have a challenge.”

Shortly after the Paralympics, Mathewson announced her retirement from tennis, giving Phelps the reigning title of American No. 1. The Phelps family moved to Orlando, Florida and their new house is located 30 minutes away from the USTA headquarters. There, Phelps trains with her new coach, Jason Harnett, as she looks to improve her rankings and earn a spot in the Grand Slams.

With another four years before the next highly anticipated Paralympic tournament in L.A., Phelps returns to playing in smaller tournaments post-Paris. Both Phelps and Mathewson share the same ambition: for the sport to continue to grow and for people to see the athletes beyond just their wheelchairs.

"I'm hoping that L.A. is like the catalyst for change," says Mathewson, "There's more and more of a view of us as athletes as opposed to just inspirational stories. And I think that any adaptive or para-athlete will tell you that is the dream."

Phelps has already made an impression on others. She befriended a girl named Lucy Heald, who is also a Chinese adoptee, at a tournament a couple of years ago. Heald is 15 years old and currently No. 7 in the junior singles rankings. Rebecca says that Phelps gives Heald advice on which tournaments to play in and what things she practices with her coach. She compared it to Mathewson's mentorship toward Phelps.

“I hope, and I do feel, like she'll be ready to step into that role and to say, ‘Here I am. I'm Maylee Phelps. I'm a pro wheelchair tennis player, and I can help you, too,’” says Rebecca. “It may not be wheelchair tennis, and it may not be the pro tennis world, but if she can just give girls, young girls, that.”

Mathewson says that she didn't have a ton of wheelchair tennis players to choose from as role models growing up. That made the few who were out there even more special. She said that being someone who others take inspiration from is a responsibility — but an honor, too.

“I think it's just growing up in the wheelchair tennis space, at least in the States, there's not a lot of female role models out there,” says Mathewson. “I think that the fact that I could be that for Maylee, and now Maylee can be that for someone else, I think it's really exciting.”