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New Zealander Rebecca Foulsham's key Paralympics role

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Rebecca Foulsham never set out to be a Paralympic classifier, but she is now in charge of an international team that plays a fundamental role in para sport.

Foulsham got into Paralympic classification in the mid-1990s through her husband Gavin Foulsham, who competed at two Paralympic Games for New Zealand.

"When I first met Gavin he was a Paralympian competing in wheelchair racing, so I would go along to competitions, and I got chatting with some of the Paralympics New Zealand staff members at the time," Foulsham says.

"They found out that I was a physiotherapist and asked if I'd be interested in helping them out with classification in athletics ... it just went from there."

Foulsham went to her first Paralympic Games, in 2000 in Sydney, as the team physio for New Zealand.

Since then, she has been "really privileged to see some pretty incredible competitions".

Two years ago, Foulsham was appointed World Para Athletics Head of Classification. She will not be heading to the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games starting this week, as most of the work of classifiers is done before the event starts.

Para sport classification defines who is eligible to compete and groups athletes with an eligible impairment into sports classes, according to how much their impairment affects their ability to carry out the activities in a specific sport.

"We've got to make sure they are in the correct class - it's better for the sport and fairer for all of the athletes within those sport classes."

Foulsham says the process around classification has evolved significantly since she first got involved nearly 30 years ago.

"Athletics was one of the first sports included in para sport and because of that it's had a little bit more time to develop its classification system.

"It used to be more diagnosis-based so if you had a particular health condition you would be grouped together, through to what it is now - a system that really looks at the impact of the athlete impairments on athletics, rather than just what your diagnosis is.

"We constantly review our rules and try to refine what we do to make it easier to apply and easier for everybody to understand."

Classifiers follow prescribed steps, which include reviewing medical documentation, carrying out physical assessments, and observing athletes in-competition.

While her role is voluntary, Foulsham is responsible for the team of classifiers, the education, and the direction of classification within the sport.

Foulsham, who lives in Hawke's Bay, has worked with hundreds of para athletes over the years, all with their own unique set of circumstances.

Telling someone that they have been classed in a category they are not expecting can be one of the more challenging aspects of the job.

"Mostly things go well but because it can have quite big consequences for athletes, particularly internationally, if things don't go how they expect - that can be difficult.

"It is something that we take really seriously, and those decisions need to be communicated really well, in a way that's understood by everybody.

"Each sport will have avenues that people can take if they're not happy with classification outcomes, so we have to make sure people are fully informed of why things have happened and what happens next."

Foulsham has worked with hundreds of para athletes over the years, including, of course, her husband.

"He's competed for New Zealand in multiple sports from para rowing to para athletics and for him it's about the competitive achievement. From a disability perspective, he's just out there doing his thing, and that includes working, having a family, and if

people find that inspiring, that's fine by him."

One of the very first athletes Foulsham worked with was Peter Martin, who competed in four Paralympics between 1996 and 2012 and won four gold medals for New Zealand.

Martin, who became quadriplegic after sustaining a spinal injury in a farm bike accident, competed in seated throwing events.

He won shot put gold at three successive Paralympics - in 1996, 2000 and 2004 - and also won gold in the javelin in 2004.

"I learned a lot from him because he was one of the first quadriplegic athletes I worked with, and he really broke all stereotypes of what a quad might be able to do, which as a young physiotherapist is something that I've carried with me, both clinically and then also through that whole para sport experience.

"He was also the first person that I attended an international classification with, and that certainly inspired me to become an international classifier. I was really interested in the process, it wasn't an easy one for him.

"He taught me a lot about seated throwing. There were a lot of athletes I learned so much from early on about their events, which are very different to able-bodied athletics."

Foulsham says she loves working with para athletes through their journey, which started in the New Zealand secondary school athletic system.

"There are quite a few that stand out because we've had a system of integrating athletics for a very long time now, which is a really positive thing for para sport.

"So the likes of Anna Grimaldi and Will Stedman, seeing them come from competing as kids at school, and then now being able to kind of silently support them at track site, at major competitions, it's pretty cool."

The Paralympic Games are now the world's third-biggest sport event in terms of ticket sales; only the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup sell more.

Is there a lot more at stake now for para athletes, who may be eligible for funding from High Performance Sport New Zealand, not to mention sponsorship opportunities?


"Absolutely, and it's not to say that there weren't some athletes back when I was first involved in the 90s and early 2000s that weren't sponsored athletes, they were. But it's become more of a requirement, you need to really be committing full-time or close to it, in some sports more than others.


"There has definitely been an evolution and with that comes higher expectations and also greater potential rewards. There are some countries where if you're achieving well on the world stage, then there is significant monetary gain to be had.


"Those drivers do mean the sports have become more professional. We're paying far greater attention to our rules processes, and it's also becoming more difficult to be selected into that higher level."

The Paris 2024 Paralympic Games start this Thursday and will bring together as many as 4400 athletes from around the world.

New Zealand is sending 25 para athletes to compete across eight different sports.


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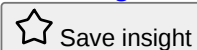


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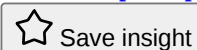


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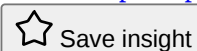


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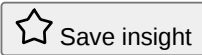
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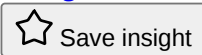


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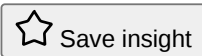


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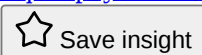
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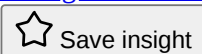


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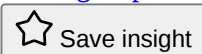
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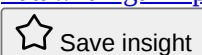
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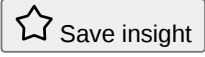
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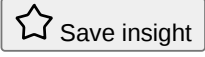
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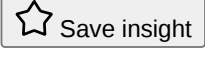
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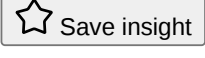
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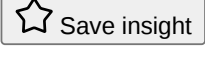
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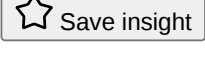
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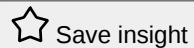
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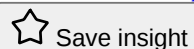
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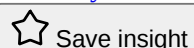
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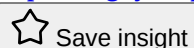
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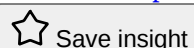
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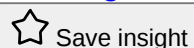
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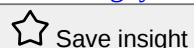
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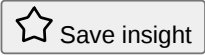
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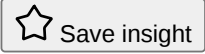
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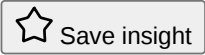
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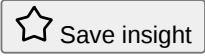
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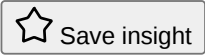
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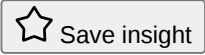
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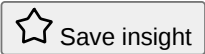
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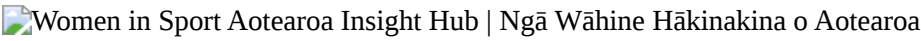
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