



Paralympian competitor, alpine skiing, 1994 Winter Olympic Games, Lillehammer, Norway; 1998 Winter Olympic Games, Nagano, Japan; and 2002 Winter Olympic Games, Salt Lake City, USA



## Faster Than the Speed of Life

The Paralympic Games are the Olympic Games equivalent for persons with a physical disability. Ian Balfour is the only Paralympic athlete to be profiled in this feature, and the only Winter Games competitor. But as a three-time contender, the 27-year-old makes a fitting representative.

Balfour was born without the lower portion of his right forearm, and grew up ski racing against able-bodied kids. His entry into the Paralympic movement was abrupt: “One day, the coach of the of the disabled provincial team came up and said, ‘Why don’t you come and race for us?’” Balfour recalls, “and I thought, ‘Well, what the hell!’ So I gave it a shot and I made the provincial team at age 12. Two years later, they took me to Lillehammer. It was a shocking experience because I was so young. But I think one of the reasons my coaches took me was to get me over that first experience of the Games. It can be overwhelming.”

Alpine racing consists of the Downhill, the Super G, the Giant Slalom (GS) and the Slalom. The first two are considered speed events; the second two, technical. Most athletes compete in one category or the other. Balfour raced all four. Training while attending high school and university, Balfour won the Downhill Alpine Skiing World Championship in Anzère, Switzerland, and spent five years on the World Cup circuit, winning the Downhill in Kimberley, BC, in 2001. Two days after the win, he tore his right knee apart in the GS. UBC doctor Paul Wright reconstructed it, and six months later he was back on snow. With Lillehammer and Nagano under his belt, Balfour was looking to Salt Lake City as his chance for an Olympic medal.

In Utah, Balfour won two of the three Downhill training runs—used to gauge speed, which can exceed 120 kilometres an hour, and find the fastest line down the mountain—and was favoured to win the event. Fast out of the gate, he skied the start of the race well, and was soon approaching Draba Drop, a blind jump at the halfway point. In training, he had been pressing the jumps, keeping his weight down and back to minimize his time in the air and get himself back onto snow, where the control was. But this time, he pressed down a split second too soon.

*I flew about 45 feet, about eight feet in the air. I pushed the tails of my skis down and they pulled me to the ground. I hit hard. I was later told by the doctor that my quads contracted with such force that it re-tore 40% of my ACL [anterior cruciate ligament].*

*There’s a long left turn after the jump, and I remember that I couldn’t hold my line. I couldn’t understand—it wasn’t the snow, it wasn’t my skis. Then I turned to the right and that was fine, so I knew there was something wrong. The problem continued as I approached the last jump leading into the finish area. The stands were full of people—my parents, my teammates and all the cameras. I flew off, landed and crossed the finish line, but I couldn’t stop on my right foot so I ended up crashing. I actually have a picture of me after crashing into the finish mats, looking up at the scoreboard. I love that picture. There’s that moment when you just realize that you go for four years and then—it’s gone. I came in fourth.*

There’s a Hallmark card that says on the front, “I wonder what ever happened to that Agony of Defeat guy ....” On the inside, it reads, “I bet he just walked it off.” Balfour skied it off in the Slalom five days later, right knee bandaged and braced. He even won the first run.

Balfour is currently articling with Blake Cassels & Graydon LLP in Calgary and is interested in tax and corporate law in the areas of oil and gas. He was UBC Law’s Class Valedictorian in 2006, walking away with four scholarships, and he makes special mention of Professor Keith Farquhar’s mentorship: “He is a very intelligent, articulate person who always made time for me and always made everyone laugh.”

An inductee of the Sports Hall of Fame in his hometown of Lethbridge, Alberta, he is also a member of the World Anti-Doping Agency and a Team VISA Mentor/Ambassador, mentoring Olympic and Paralympic athletes since 2005. “This ambassadorship has allowed me to help younger athletes,” says Balfour, “and athletes who are going through the same issues I went through.”

As for that “disability,” Balfour says, “I think everyone has issues, and I don’t think my life has been any tougher than anyone else’s. My parents were really good to me and I’ve just always adapted. It’s just sort of how you approach life.” ●