

Canada's para-swimmers of all ages and experience make up a great team

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By Israel Fehr

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TORONTO – The 13-year-old and 40-year-old rookies want what the 20-year-old and 32-year-old veterans have: medals in the pool at the Paralympics.

Benoit Huot has 19 medals – nine of them gold – from four Paralympic Games and at 32 is determined to show he's still a top contender. Aurelie Rivard won a silver medal in London as a 16-year-old and is poised to win a bunch more in Rio when the Paralympics begin Wednesday.

Danielle Dorris, 13, and Tammy Cunnington, 40, couldn't have better leaders around them as they head into their first Games.

Huot's resume speaks for itself. He's been a pioneer in the sport and what better way to potentially complete that legacy than by adding more medals to his haul. Huot says he's been swimming some of his personal best times in the lead-up to the Paralympics and feels like his physical shape is as good as ever.

"I'll finish with Rio and I'll re-evaluate after the Games if I have another year in me and if I do, I'll go year-by-year," said Huot. "I'm 32 now and I think it's really difficult to put myself in the mindset of that I'm going for another full cycle.

"I'm very pleased to see where our sport is going so if this is it for me, I feel like there's a great legacy behind," he said. "I feel like I'm leaving at a good place. I don't know what I'm going to do after but maybe I can still help."

And while Rio might be the last time Huot competes at the Paralympics, Rivard has the talent to make sure Canada continues to have a star in the pool for the foreseeable future.

Rivard will swim in seven events and will be the favourite in many of them. She's grown a lot since her Paralympic debut in 2012 and she's prepared for what could be her big breakout over the next week and a half.

"When I was in London, I was only 16 years old, I was a kid, I didn't know what to expect," said Rivard. "I was going there like totally clueless, I was so impressed by everything, so amazed, I was just there to get some experience.

"Now I'm kind of the girl to beat. It adds a little bit of pressure as well, but I really just want to go there and have the best swim meet of my life and hopefully bring medals home."

Cunnington has the same goal, even if it's only been just over a year that her focus has been solely on swimming. She had been training to do the triathlon until her class was eliminated from the Paralympics.

That could have been the end of her Paralympic pursuit, but she remained committed to realizing her dream and has taken to swimming faster than anyone could have expected. Cunnington broke a world-record in the S4 class women's 50m butterfly in December and then broke it again, twice, in July. Now that she's on the biggest stage in sports, she's ready to compete, regardless of her age and experience.

"I've been looking at the Paralympics for a long time, working towards it, in two different sports before than swimming, but I've finally reached my goal," said Cunnington. "My goal in Rio is to make the final in at least four of my events, and once you make that final then anything can happen."

Dorris is the youngest Canadian Paralympic swimmer ever. There's a certain pressure that comes with that, but her perspective, coaching, and advice she's received certainly helps with that.

"It's nerve-wrecking but exciting at the same time," said Dorris. "I'm hoping to reach my best times, have fun, take in the experience and meet new people."

And despite her youth compared to some of her teammates, she says there's no issue fitting in .

"They all act childish as well so we're a pretty good team," said Dorris while laughing.

That team, with their game-faces on, has set a target of 14 medals in the pool in Rio. And the beauty of the team is that it could be the 32-year-old at his fifth Paralympics, the 20-year-old at her second or the 40-year-old and 13-year-old at their first that could be on the podium after any given race.

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