

## Colette Bourgonje: Opportunity and Accomplishment

Colette Bourgonje does not shy away from competition.

Since 1992, she has attended nine different Paralympic games – in Barcelona, Tignes-Albertville, Lillehammer, Atlanta, Nagano, Sydney, Salt Lake City, Torino and Vancouver - and has won ten medals. Since 2000 she has focused on sit-ski, but she competed in both summer and winter events prior to that.

Bourgonje won two bronze medals at the summer Paralympics in Barcelona, two more in Atlanta also in wheelchair athletics, and in 1998 in Nagano she won two silver medals in sit-ski. In Torino in 2006 she won another two bronze medals, and in 2010 she won a bronze and a silver medal on home soil at the Vancouver Games. At the closing ceremony to the Vancouver games she was awarded the Whang Youn Dai Achievement award, which is a solid gold medal, recognizing paralympians who exemplify the spirit of the games. Competing outside of the Paralympics, Bourgonje has an equally long list of world championship titles in sit-ski.

Though there have been too many highlights in her athletic career for Bourgonje to pick one, she points to her silver medals in Nagano and Vancouver as particularly special. In Nagano, they were her first medals in Nordic events and marked her as a medalist in winter and summer events, and the silver in Vancouver was the first ever Canadian Paralympic medal to be won at home.

“I have had amazing opportunities because of sport,” she said. For the last seven years, she has left Canada in summer months to hone her cross-country sit-ski skills in the mountains of New Zealand. At other times she has travelled to Finland to train in indoor cross-country ski tunnels.

As a teenager, Bourgonje was a national-level cross-country runner and she said sit-ski has appealed to her, more so than wheelchair athletics even, because it is similar to cross-country running. She said it is also more challenging than wheelchair athletics. In 1991 she tried the sit-ski for the first time and her reaction was, “wow, this is awesome.”

A car accident in 1980, while she was in her final year of high school, left Bourgonje paralyzed from the waist down. “It was a bit of a transitioning period,” she said. Not only was she entering university, but she was doing so newly confined to a wheelchair. Bourgonje was not deterred, and by 1984 she had acquired a racing chair and was competing in her first 10 kilometre race against more than 200 runners. She placed around 80<sup>th</sup>, and as years went on her times improved. “Within two or three years, if a runner beat you then you knew you hadn’t had a very good race,” she explained.

“I knew I wanted to be an athlete from a very young age. At recess in elementary school I would be the first one out the door to play soccer,” said Bourgonje. “I played all the sports that were offered at school.”

She emphasized the opportunities she has had because of sport, and how she is filled with gratitude. “You put the effort in and you get so much in return,” Bourgonje said sharing some wisdom. “Try different sports, find the ones you enjoy and have fun. It will improve your quality of life.”