

Olympic Athlete with Hearing Loss Makes History

BY MEREDITH RESNICK

Twenty-three-year-old Aaron Small has come a long way from the teasing and bullying he experienced in grade school. The Seattle, Washington native, diagnosed with bilateral hearing loss at age five, competed in the Paris Olympics this summer, as the first-ever Team USA sprint kayaker with hearing loss.

Aaron and teammate Jonas Ecker also made history as the first U.S. Olympic kayakers to reach a top-tier final in 24 years. Small and Ecker narrowly missed a medal during this year's summer games.

"I'm thrilled with our performance. It's more than we ever could have imagined," Small told me of his Olympic experience, a lifelong dream. Small described having to pinch himself to remember that he wasn't just attending as a fan, but as an actual competitor. Encountering decorated gymnast Simone Biles and other well-known athletes in line in the dining hall had him almost speechless.

Small says his hearing loss has taught him to adapt and advocate for himself—a skill he admits still needs improvement. As a young boy, he struggled in school to speak up for the accessibility he needed to hear teachers and friends. He now gets by with hearing aids and a Roger microphone—a device that feeds audio directly into his hearing aids. The combination helped him graduate from the University of Washington last year in Oceanography. He's now working as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) in southern California, where he recently moved for warm-weather kayak training.

Aaron says he wears his hearing aids during practice, but not competitions. He likes the quiet during races, and much of the communication with his teammate is done ahead of time.

Out of the water, he loves the community aspect of the niche sport. He estimates there are less than 1,000 sprint kayakers across the U.S., and they run into each other at competitions throughout the year, giving him a tight-knit group of friends to rely on.

Asked if his hearing loss held him back at all, Aaron told me, "You either have to embrace or fight it, and you have to embrace it if you want to achieve everything you want." He wants to be the kind of role model he wished



Olympian Aaron Small enjoys the Opening Ceremony of the Paris Olympics with Team USA on July 26, 2024.



Aaron Small and his sprint kayaking teammate Jonas Ecker compete at the Paris Olympics this summer, where they became the first Team USA kayakers to reach a top-tier final in 24 years.

he'd had as a kid. He hopes to show others that hearing loss doesn't have to stop you from doing what you love. "I'm very excited to be in this position, where I can raise awareness about hearing health and advocate for others and help break down the stigma of hearing loss."

Aaron says for now he's focusing on training, and he hopes to compete in the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. **HL**

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