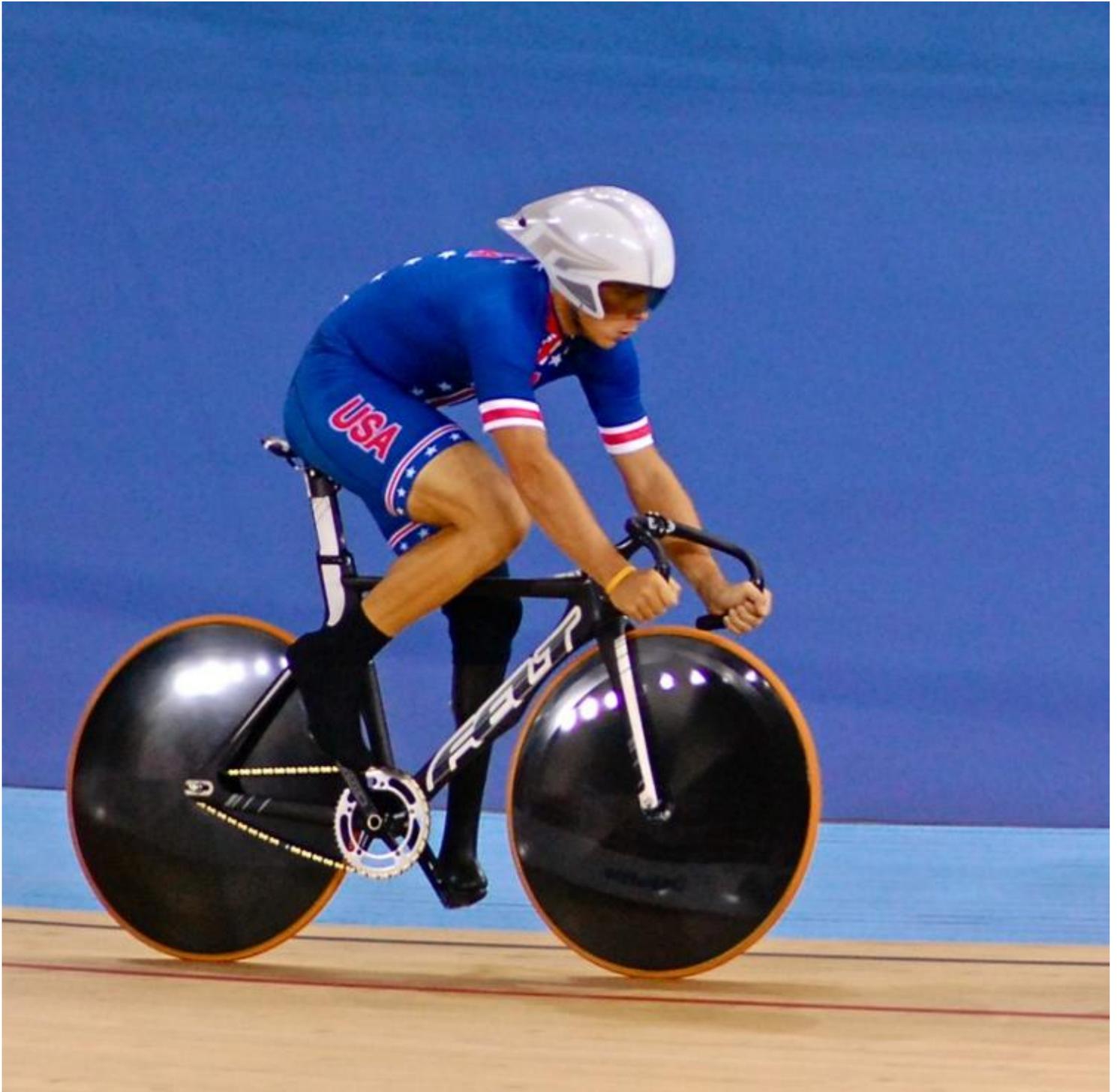


SPOTLIGHT

Former Bozeman man, Montana State University student wins Paralympic bronze

Sam and Sara Kavanagh regale their London experience

JODI HAUSEN, Chronicle Staff Writer Sep 21, 2012



Cyclist Sam Kavanagh, formerly of Bozeman, races in the Paralympic Games in London.

Back home more than a week from the London Paralympics, cyclist Sam Kavanagh still wrestles with words to describe it.

“There was little I could do to prepare for the experience,” he said Thursday in a phone interview from his Castle Rock, Colo., home. “I’ve never been a part of something so big in my life.”

Millions of viewers watched the games online; 2.7 million people bought tickets to events.

Walking into the arena to 80,000 screaming people was awe-inspiring, Kavanagh said. “The rush of energy at every final and at every event was amazing.”

An avid backcountry skier, Kavanagh, 33, lost his leg below the knee after getting caught in an avalanche eight years ago. He and his family reluctantly moved from Bozeman to Colorado so Kavanagh could be closer to training venues.

And the training paid off.

Kavanagh, Jennifer Schuble and Joe Berenyi won a bronze medal for the U.S. in mixed disability team sprint – a fast three-lap track race where three riders start together, dropping one rider after each lap, leaving one to sprint to the finish. Kavanagh’s team broke a U.S. Paralympic record for the event with a time of 52.75 seconds.

It was the first time the U.S. medaled in the event though they’d almost always made finals, Kavanagh said.

Winning the bronze in London with his wife and parents watching was “unreal,” he said. “Doing it in front of my family, I could have ridden around that track for several hours pumping my fists.”

People in London seemed as awed with Paralympic athletes as they were with Olympians, Kavanagh’s wife, Sara, said.

Hearing the same announcer who’d “said the most famous names in cycling” during the Tour de France say his name was “surreal,” Kavanagh said.

“He felt like a celebrity,” Sara said. “There’s definitely a lack of understanding (in the U.S.) for what the Paralympics is. It spurred me on to want to help people understand. Every single person there has a story – they’ve gone through tragedies and come through the other side to become elite athletes.”

The fates weren’t always kind to Kavanagh.

In the lead group through most of the 60-mile road race, on the penultimate lap, a near-collision damaged his bike.

“I had really good legs that day,” he said.

And he was among the strongest sprinters in the group with a good shot at a medal.

But Kavanagh crossed the finish line 22nd – the last cyclist to complete the race.

Kavanagh stayed positive.

“I may never get back to experience this again,” he’d thought.

So as he crossed the finish line, “I sat up and waved to the crowd,” he said.

It’s that attitude Sara appreciates most about her husband.

The road race was “super disappointing,” she said. “But watching him be positive, despite the frustration, it was overwhelmingly an amazing experience.”

“Sam is always positive, no matter what happens to him, and that’s something that blesses me,” Sara said. “Sam could have become bitter and angry” after losing his leg. “But he’s chosen to take what’s happened to him to make him a better person” and help others by telling his story.

“It’s so much bigger than ourselves,” she added. “I’m not going to lie, gold medals would be great. But in the end, what truly matters is the impact you have on others and that their lives are changed for the better.”

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