

HEART OF A CHAMPION

NIB and the U.S. Association of Blind Athletes helped Paralympian Clark Rachfal translate his competitive drive into workplace success.

BY JOHN DOS PASSOS COGGIN



▲ NIB Public Policy Manager Clark Rachfal (left) accompanies Advocate for Leadership and Employment Mike Guajardo (center) of San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind and Vision Impaired, and agency President and CEO Michael Gilliam on a Capitol Hill visit during the 2017 NIB/NAEPB National Symposium.

After retiring from sports, many Olympic and Paralympic athletes struggle to join the workforce. “If they’re throwing their entire life into being the best in the world, how can any athlete also fully concentrate on their education, their career?” asks Mark Lucas, executive director of the U.S. Association of Blind Athletes (USABA), in explaining the challenge. For people who are blind, the transition can be even tougher: Nearly 70 percent of working-age Americans who are blind are not employed.

A partnership between USABA and National Industries for the Blind (NIB) is working to change that, helping athletes who are blind integrate into the workforce. USABA, a nonprofit founded in 1976, empowers Americans who are

blind and visually impaired to experience life-changing opportunities in sports, recreation, and physical activities. The partnership with NIB began in 2016 at the recommendation of NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch. USABA refers athletes to NIB for employment at NIB headquarters, associated nonprofit agencies, or at other companies.

NIB Public Policy Manager Clark Rachfal is the first athlete referred by USABA to be placed at NIB. Rachfal was declared legally blind at age 4 and diagnosed in his mid-20s with Leber congenital amaurosis (LCA), a rare degenerative eye condition that resulted in almost total blindness.

He came to NIB from the world of competitive cycling. At the 2012

Paralympic Games in London, Rachfal and his pilot, Dave Swanson, took sixth in the individual pursuit and seventh in the individual 1 kilometer time trial.

Rachfal discovered the sport in college, while studying abroad in Australia in 2004 and 2005. While Down Under, a friend encouraged him to ride a tandem bicycle on a 270-kilometer, three-day fundraising ride. Rachfal was hooked, dedicating himself to excelling in cycling. After graduating from Towson University in Maryland with a degree in political science and economics he was accepted to a USABA tandem cycling camp at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 2006.

At that summer camp, Rachfal met Swanson and launched full-speed into the competitive cycling life, competing nationally in 2007. Training as a tandem cyclist required forging an unbreakable bond with his pilot, a challenge compounded by the fact that Swanson lived in Arizona, 2,000 miles away from Rachfal’s home in Annapolis, Maryland. While training, Rachfal worked as a policy analyst at a large telecommunications company in Washington, D.C. In 2009, he and Swanson won the World



▲ Rachfal (center), with NIB Employment Support Services Director Billy Parker (left) and NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch (right), was one of 10 exceptional individuals with disabilities recognized as an employee of the year by CAREERS & the disABLED.

Championship at the UCI Para-Cycling Track World Championship competition; by 2012, the duo was competing in the London Paralympic Games.

USABA's Lucas says discovering an elite athlete of Rachfal's caliber is far from the norm for the organization. "Occasionally one in 15, one in 20, will have the ability, the skills, the drive, the knowledge, the desire to want to take their game to the next level, including going to national championships and the highest level, the Paralympic Games." He calls Rachfal's high marks at the Games in London "incredible feats."

"Other than being on the podium at events, being selected to the Games and walking through the tunnel and into the stadium at opening ceremonies is probably the emotional high of any athlete's career," says Rachfal. He is proud of his medals, the longevity of his success with Swanson, and the successes of his teammates, who became like family.

After London, Rachfal became a mentor with Classroom Champions, a program connecting top athletes with students in underserved schools. Co-founded by three-time U.S. Olympian Steve Mesler, Classroom Champions has reached more than 25,000 students

across the globe. Rachfal found the experience rewarding on many levels. "The program pushed me beyond my comfort zone for group and video communications, and I gained greater understanding of what morals and values are important to me."

After he retired from cycling at the end of 2016, USABA referred Rachfal to NIB, where he joined the public policy team in April 2017.

At NIB, Rachfal manages the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program, serving as a mentor, tutor, and role model for about 50 employees who are blind working at NIB associated agencies, helping them learn about lobbying and public policymaking.

"This program is in line with the NIB mission of enhancing opportunities for people who are blind," Rachfal says. "The goal of the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program is promoting self-confidence and enriching communication skills so participants can effectively share their story and positively impact public policy decisions on the federal, state, and local levels."

In April, Rachfal was one of 10 exceptional individuals with disabilities recognized as

an employee of the year by CAREERS & the disABLED, a career-guidance and recruitment magazine for college students and professionals with disabilities. He was selected for the award based on job performance, community service, and advocacy for people with disabilities.

"Clark's only scratched the potential of where he's going, I know," says Billy Parker, employment support services program director at NIB.

So far, 20 candidates from a variety of sports have been referred to NIB by USABA. Some athletes who are still competing want to establish a relationship with NIB now, intending to circle back after retirement.

Parker looks forward to growing the relationship. "The people at USABA have been great partners who have provided NIB excellent candidates for employment," he says. "The attributes that contribute to being successful as an athlete also contribute to success as an employee." Rachfal brings those attributes and more to his public policy career at NIB. □

John Dos Passos Coggin is a freelance writer based in Alexandria, Virginia.



▲ On the podium at the 2009 UCI Para-Cycling Track World Championships in Manchester, England, world champions Rachfal (left) and pilot Dave Swanson sport their gold medals after winning the 4 kilometer Individual Pursuit.



▲ Rachfal and pilot Dave Swanson competing in the London 2012 Paralympic Games. Photo by Brian Hodes, Cycling Illustrated.