

Movies

Filmmaker Corey Lee explores the Rare Mettle of Calgary Paralympians in new documentary

Eric Volmers • Calgary Herald
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Calgary athlete Chad Jassman in *Rare Mettle*. PHOTO BY COURTESY, ENRIQUEPOE MOVING PICTURES.

When filming his new documentary, *Rare Mettle*, Corey Lee wanted some footage of his athletic subjects during their downtime.

Well, maybe not downtime exactly; these are not the types to spend much time taking it easy. But Lee had hoped to mix it up a little by capturing segments of the four Calgary athletes doing something other than the sports they excel at as Paralympians. He didn't have much luck. It turns out the passions of track and field star Alister McQueen, swimmer Morgan Bird, snowboarder Michelle Salt and wheelchair basketball player Chad Jassman can be all consuming.

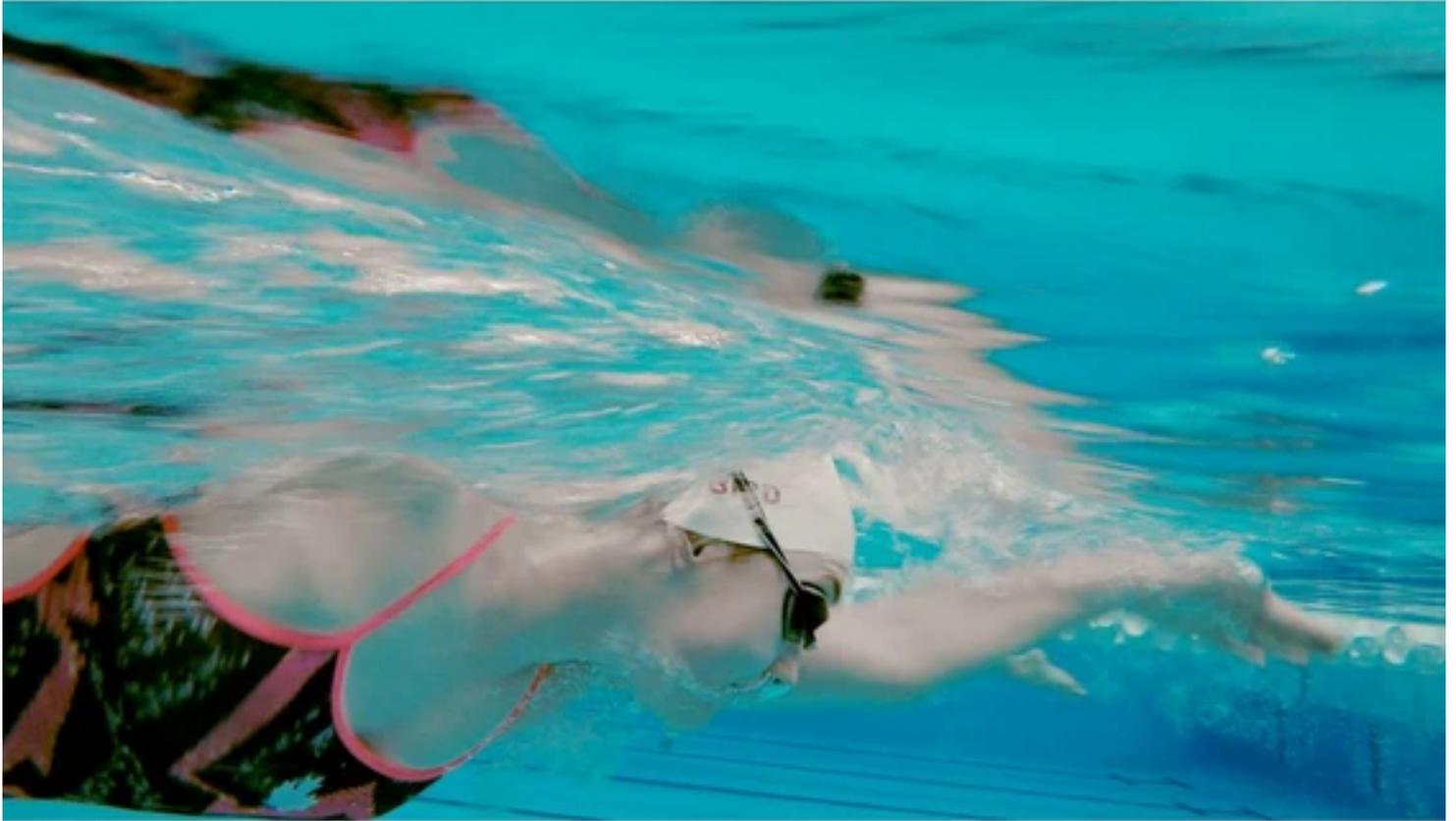
"It was like 'Can we see you doing something else?'" says Lee. "I mean, they do, but 85 per cent of their time they are putting all their eggs in that jar to go to the next Paralympic Games or the next world championships. There is a lot of dedication there."

So it's hardly surprising that much of the hour-long documentary, which will screen Saturday at the Plaza Theatre and becomes available on Telus Video On Demand on July 26, is dedicated to that dedication. We see the training and early mornings. We hear

the triumph in their voices when they do well and the disappointment when they feel they have performed below their abilities. We hear of the inspiring coaches, tough love and push for peak performance.

We also get plenty of fantastic action footage from Lee, a filmmaker well-versed in capturing athletes in action.

But the heart of the film may be the athletes' backstories, which are told in a somewhat matter-of-fact manner in interview segments. We hear how having his left leg amputated at nine months of age due to a congenital birth condition did little to dim McQueen's athletic prowess and desire to compete, leading to a career that includes snagging a silver medal in javelin at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.



Calgary athlete Morgan Bird in *Rare Mettle*. PHOTO BY COURTESY, ENRIQUEPOE MOVING PICTURES.

Born with cerebral palsy, Bird, was a longtime “water bug” who decided to use swimming as a replacement for physiotherapy and became a record-breaking athlete who has competed around the world.

Chad Jassman broke his back in a car accident in 2004, but would go on to join the Canada's National Team in wheelchair basketball and play professionally in Germany.

Michelle Salt is a former drug addict who almost died in a horrifying motorcycle accident in 2011. She lost her right leg above her knee, but became a member of Canada's first Paralympic Games snowboarding team.

Both Salt and Jassman made the plan to compete while still recovering in the hospital, determined not to let their new circumstances end their athletic ambitions.

“I go back to the title of the piece, I think they are rare,” says Lee. “I guess I just turn it back on myself as a storyteller. If I got into an accident and suddenly lost the use of my legs or there is an amputation, how would I react to that? How would I recover from that?”

As a filmmaker, what if all of a sudden I lost my sight? How would I transition into the rest of my life? I don't know. I don't think you know until you are there and it happens to you."

Born in Edmonton and a graduate of Southern Alberta Institute of Technology's film school, Lee worked in the grip department on a number of high-profile Alberta-shot films such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* before deciding to focus full time on his own work. The turning point came with his 2012 National Film Board documentary *Legend of a Warrior*, a personal story that found the filmmaker attempting to reconnect with his distant father, renowned martial artist Frank Lee. It helped establish Lee as someone with a talent for shooting athletics. Since then he has made three short documentaries — *The Harder I Fight* and its two sequels — about women involved in combat sports.

Since the Paralympics tends to fly under the radar for many people, Lee says he hopes *Rare Mettle* provides inspiration for young people with disabilities to see sports participation as a viable option. As for everyone else, he just hopes it provides inspiration.

"I hope these stories inspire people to be more active," Lee says. "I think as a culture, it's easy to be lazy or tired and not hit the pool and not go to the gym and not go to spin class or whatever. I hope all of us can look at what these four amazing athletes have faced and be inspired."

Rare Mettle will screen Saturday, July 22 at 5:30 p.m. at the Plaza Theatre. It also launches on Telus VOD on July 26. Visit raremettle.ca

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