

BY SUSAN OWEN ATKINSON

Katrin Green is a champion in every sense of the word. The fastest female Paralympic sprinter in the world, she brings a unique perspective to the Physician's Associate Program at OUHSC.

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Always Going for the
Gold



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While many of Katrin Green's sponsored competitors devote their lives to training, she has chosen to combine being a professional athlete with life as a full-time Physician's Associate student.



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A long day winds to a close for Katrin Green, a first-year student in the University of Oklahoma's Physician's Associate (PA) program. She gathers her books, head spinning from the day's discussions of clinical anatomy and biochemistry. It is 5 p.m., and the brown-eyed, 26-year-old blonde heads to her car, which is littered with the detritus of commuters everywhere: coffee cups, paper napkins, CDs. But her day is far from over.

Instead of the comforts of her Edmond home, Katrin heads for the track. There she dons workout gear, exchanges her walking leg for a running leg and begins her second job: maintaining her title as the fastest female Paralympic sprinter in the world.

At the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing, representing her native Germany, Katrin Green thundered down the 100-meter racecourse in 13.40 seconds, trampling the competition and earning her first gold medal. She did it again in the 200-meter race in just over 28 seconds. She accomplished these feats—and hopes to do so again in London in 2012—with indelible con-

fidence, a phenomenal work ethic and a devoted pit crew who believe in her, body and soul.

Katrin Green grew up on a dairy farm in Ruthweiler, near Frankfurt, Germany. When she was five years old, a flying brush hog blade severed her left leg below the knee. Raised in a "no-excuses" family, she grew up running and jumping and climbing trees with her three brothers, but as a child with a prosthetic leg, she also expended a lot of energy pretending not to be disabled.

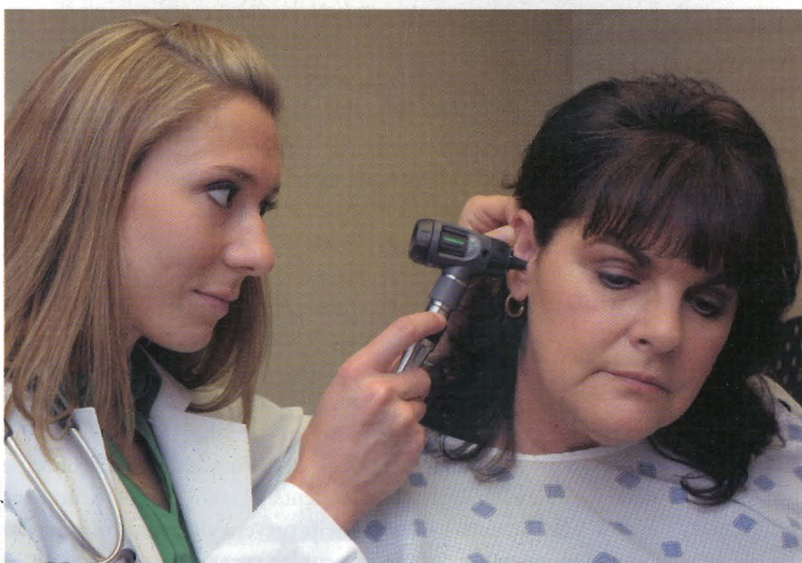
At 16, Katrin was discovered by a major sponsor of German Paralympic sports while running the halls of her prosthetist's office. The sponsor convinced her to try running in local club events, and she loved it. Eventually she left home to pursue serious training as a disabled athlete and at 17 qualified for her first international competition at the 2002 World Paralympic Games in France.

"Before that I was always trying to fit into the able-bodied world as much as possible," she recalls. "But here I was surrounded by athletes who stood out by intention! They were proud of what



Robert Taylor

PA Director Daniel McNeill, left, credits Green's international background with making her a fully engaged, confident student, always curious and questioning. He sees PAs functioning at a level of autonomy and competency undreamed of just 20 years ago.



Robert Taylor

As Green enters the fall semester at OUHSC, she will begin the 11 different rotations required to complete the PA program, giving her exposure to areas of specialization that will fit her desire to apply a holistic approach to her practice, to "treat the whole person."

they were doing—running fast and jumping high. For the first time I identified myself with my disability in a positive light."

In 2004, a near-collision during practice runs at the Paralympic Games in Athens cemented Katrin's future path to the University

“For the first time I identified myself with my disability in a positive light.”

of Oklahoma. On that track she met Roderick Green, a multi-sport Paralympian medalist and transplanted Oklahoman. The couple married six months later, and Katrin immigrated to the Sooner state in 2005.

Always interested in pursuing a career in medicine, Katrin has completed the first 15 months of PA course work at OU's Health Sciences Center. It has been grueling, but she has done well and serves as vice president for her class of 50 students. She is eager for August when she begins the 11 clinical rotations that are required to complete the 30-month program.

For Katrin, who has experienced first-hand the incredible comfort that caring clinicians can give their patients, the holistic approach that characterizes OU's PA program was a natural fit. "I want to treat the whole person, not just the condition," Green says.

To that end, instead of biology, the traditional undergraduate degree for most PA students, Katrin majored in Spanish at the University of Central Oklahoma, believing that language would be helpful to her as a future practitioner. Only a little more than a year into the PA program, Katrin has not yet nailed down an area of specialization; officially she is interested in everything.

Katrin struggles to balance her life as a professional athlete and a full-time student. She knows



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Green says husband and coach Roderick Green has helped her maintain a top three spot among the world's Paralympic sprinters.



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Sabolich knows that his prosthetics are good but credits Green's determination and intense training with 95 percent of her success.

that many of her competitors have full sponsorships and devote most of their time to training. Though she worries a little about falling behind, she believes that the notion of a holistic approach applies to her entire life, not just her future practice as a PA. So she lifts weights during lunch and stashes her running leg in the trunk of her car in order to hit the track after class.

That same philosophy attracted Katrin to OU's PA program. "Our students are trained in a team-care approach," says Director Daniel McNeill, PhD, PA-C. "They are also trained to spend time getting to know patients and understand their backgrounds as a foundation of treatment."

McNeill observes that Katrin's own international background, travel and competition on the world stage give her great confidence as a student. "She is willing to ask the questions that others may be thinking but don't have the moxie to ask out loud," says McNeill. "This is very helpful to her fellow students."

"It's true. Katrin is not at all shy," laughs Bruna Varalli-Claypool, MHS, PA-C, Didactic Curriculum coordinator for the PA program. "I think her history of overcoming childhood trauma, moving to a foreign country—her life experience is what will make Katrin an excellent PA."

In addition to supportive professors, Katrin's pit crew includes her husband, Roderick, who is also her coach. "He's really tough," she says, "but he's very successful, too." Another invaluable

team member is Scott Sabolich, the third-generation prosthetist who operates Oklahoma City's Scott Sabolich Prosthetics & Research, the largest such clinic in the United States.

Sabolich, prosthetist for Team USA Paralympics and Katrin's sponsor for the 2008 Beijing Games, regards the custom-made carbon fiber running legs his athletes use to perform simply as tools. "With every joint lost," says Sabolich, "a Paralympic athlete must exert double the energy an able-bodied athlete uses to perform the same task. Our prosthetics are good at mechanically mimicking a missing limb, but we're not a magic bullet. Katrin has incredible musculature and core strength. Her success is 5 percent our legs and 95 percent her innate ability."

Though the 2012 Paralympic Games in London are more than a year away, Katrin Green is dead set on defending her title as one of the fastest women on the planet. But during that same time, her entire future as a Physician's Associate will begin to unfold. She looks forward to the day when she can bring her message of hope in the face of long odds to her patients. "I want to help educate as well as heal people; I want to help prevent diseases and injuries. I can't wait to see the shine in people's eyes when they figure out how to use what they have to their best advantage."

Susan Owen Atkinson is a freelance writer living in Norman, Oklahoma.