

Sprinter, 11, has eye on future Paralympics

BY BRAD FORREST

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YOUNG Engadine amputee athlete, Sarah Walsh, heads to the inaugural Australian Youth Paralympic Games in Melbourne with renewed confidence – and a new "leg".

Since the brilliant 11-year-old sprinter received her new prosthetic blade she has been setting new marks which rival those of older teenagers.

Sarah, the youngest athlete in NSW to be fitted with such a prosthetic, has improved her running style and times so dramatically that since the Primary Schools Sports Association (PSSA) Games in Canberra last year, when she set two Australian Under 16 and one U12 girls' age records, her 100-metres personal best time has come down nearly five seconds (to 15.4sec) and her 200m by a whopping eight seconds (33.56sec).

"Sarah doesn't struggle to the line anymore, she now enjoys her running," said her proud mother Patricia this week, after her daughter became the subject of much interest from officials from the Australian Paralympic Committee (APC) in their search for the next generation of Paralympians.

"Thanks to the generosity of Otto Bock Australia and the Appliance and Limb Centre at Redfern, her new blade has given her new confidence, too."

At the MacKillop Athletic Trials at Blacktown last week, the youngster, coached by David Scott from the Helensburgh Little Athletics Club, set two personal bests in winning the 100m and 200m senior finals, and came second in long jump and shot put.

Now, before representing MacKillop at the PSSA state finals, she will travel with her parents to Melbourne this weekend to represent NSW, again against older girls (aged up to 14 years) at the Australian Youth Paralympic Games.

If she does personal bests she will be in line to improve on her national U16 100m and long-jump records, her U12 shot putt mark and possibly a 200m record.

"I would like to do personal bests in my three 50-metre swim events, too," said Sarah, who trains with Mick and Justine Maroney at Engadine Swim Centre.

Last Sunday, Sarah was among about 30 St George and Sutherland Shire athletes at the Toyota Paralympic Talent Search Day at Hurstville Leisure Centre, where Australian Paralympic Committee (APC) staff measured the skill and ability of participants.

The day included appearances by 2008 Paralympic medalists, rower Kathryn Ross and cyclist Jayme Paris.

Anna Muldoon, the APCs development co-ordinator, said talented athletes would be directed into development pathways, towards becoming an Australian Paralympians.

Former Olympian Miles Murphy, now the APC chief executive, said: "The value of the program was highlighted when 27 athletes identified rose through our system and won 14 medals at the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games, and helped Australia maintain its top-five place on the Games' medal tally."

Sarah's success hasn't changed her modesty and laid-back attitudes. When asked at school last week if she had won any races she casually answered: "Oh, a few" and her two gold and two silver medals stayed in her pocket.



Personal bests: Sarah Walsh, winning the 200 metres at the MacKillop Athletic trials, has thrived since getting her new prosthetic running blade.