



Ellen Buttrick (far right) with her teammates winning gold at the World Championships. Photo credit: British Rowing/Naomi Baker

Apr 11, 2019 11:56 BST

Ellen fights the odds for place in GB rowing squad

Despite being diagnosed with an incurable eye disorder, 24-year-old Ellen Buttrick has confronted her challenges head-on, earning a place in the Great British Paralympic rowing squad while also pursuing her passion for working in human rights.

After seeing people row near her home in Leeds, Ellen's love of rowing began when she started a learn-to-row course during the opening week of the London Olympics. Her studies took her to Northumbria University, where she

completed her geography degree in 2017.

While at Northumbria, Ellen was diagnosed with juvenile macular degeneration, an inherited eye disorder which results in a gradual loss of vision and is currently incurable.

“I stopped rowing after I was first diagnosed,” she said. “The shock of finding out I had this disease, and coming to terms with it, had a profound effect on me. I focussed instead on my university work.

“My lecturers were so supportive and made sure I had all the equipment I needed to make the most of my degree and be equal in opportunities to everyone else on my course.”

After attending a GB Talent ID day and going through the classification process, she joined the GB Para-rowing squad in 2018 and feels lucky to be training alongside crew mates, including Paralympic champions such as Grace Clough and Dan Brown.

Her rapid progress into the GB Para-Rowing squad was made possible thanks to the support of the National Lottery and UK Sport, where coaches Ella Willott and Nick Baker helped her improve her technique and performance as Ellen trained hard for selection to the Para-rowing squad. After winning gold in the mixed coxed four event at last year’s World Championships, Ellen and her teammates are looking to maintain their title at this year’s Championships in Austria in August, these are the qualification regatta for the 2020 Paralympics.

The geography graduate has worked at the Refugee Council in Leeds, as well as completing internships for a London council and political think tank in Prague. Ellen also opted for a placement year at neighbouring Gateshead Council while a student at Northumbria. However, she has put her career in public policy on hold while she pursues her dream of representing Great Britain at the next Paralympic Games.

“For a while, I worked three days a week as office coordinator for the resettlement programme at the Refugee Council in Leeds, while also training with the Para-rowing squad nearly 200 miles away in Reading,” she said. “My training regime in the build up to the Tokyo 2020 Games is pretty rigorous,

but I would eventually like to work for a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) in public policy.

“I feel privileged to have the opportunity to represent my country at international competitions, which I see as making the most out of an unfortunate situation.”

Geography students at Northumbria have gone on to roles in government and local authorities in countries across the world, as elected MPs, heads of government departments and with non-governmental organisations such as Oxfam, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and World Vision.

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