

Technical advances help erase stigma of prosthetics

June 5 2009, By James H. Burnett III

A Scottish magazine once ran a headline above an article on former Paralympics track star Aimee Mullins that read, "Can You See Anything Wrong With This Woman? No? Her Either."

Mullins, 33, had both legs amputated just below the knee when she was 1 because she was born with fibular hemimelia (missing fibula bones).

Mullins, a New York-based model, speaker and actress, says she has benefited from the progressive change in prosthetic technology over the past three decades.

By "progressive," Mullins means her artificial legs -- some of which flex at the [ankle joint](#) and bend at the knee. They are a far cry from the unbendable plastic and wooden limbs that required her to almost waddle as a child.

"Today they're made of lightweight composites. They have bounce and spring to them, mimicking the natural step," Mullins says. "But this is about more than the technology. There really once was a stigma to having prosthetics that suggested you weren't a complete person if you had to use them. I think they've now started able-bodied athletes scratching their heads, because I've raced and beat some of them, too."

And athletes aren't the only ones scratching their heads.

Mullins recalls a Chanel fashion party she attended recently, at which

she wore one of her longer sets of prosthetics that stretched the blond bombshell's normally 5-foot, 8-inch frame to 6 feet, frustrating and angering another woman who pouted and accused Mullins of "having an unfair advantage."

Her legs, she explains, are not just made for walkin'. They're also a functional but optionally stylish fashion accessory, much like eyeglasses and contact lenses have become.

"It's a funny thing when you cross the line from being cute to people to almost being a threat," Mullins says, chuckling. "People once viewed the physically disabled as cute, and to be pitied. So yes, the technology has changed attitudes. I think we're at the beginning of the end of that period when people who are missing natural limbs or have some other physical issue are automatically considered disabled. I'm certainly seeing less of that kind of attitude."

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