

'Moving forward': Battling Parkinson's, he's rowing his way to Paralympic games

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For decades, Todd Vogt has been dedicated to the sport of rowing, believing he was in peak physical condition. Then, a series of symptoms began to emerge, turning his life upside down.

"My left arm stopped swinging, and I felt incredibly fatigued," [Vogt](#), 49, recalled. "Eventually, a tremor developed in my hand, and I slowly began to realize something was wrong."

That was in 2018. Since then, he has navigated life with Parkinson's [disease](#), managing his symptoms and maintaining his rowing career. This summer, he will compete in the Paralympic Games in Paris.

But the journey has been anything but easy.

Parkinson's disease affects about 1.5 million people in the United States, with symptoms that include tremor, muscle stiffness, slow movement and problems with coordination and balance. These symptoms typically worsen over time.

In Vogt's case, he faces challenges such as fatigue, weakness and involuntary tremor in his left hand and foot. Despite these obstacles, he believes his rigorous [exercise](#) routine has played a crucial role in managing the disease.

"I believe all the exercise I've been doing has delayed the progression," he said.

Vogt's introduction to rowing came during his freshman year at the University of Buffalo in 1992. His passion for the sport was immediate, leading him to row competitively throughout college and beyond. After college, he transitioned to coaching, a role that kept him deeply connected to rowing.

When he started experiencing symptoms, Vogt sought medical advice and was diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson's disease. Initially, he feared his rowing career was over.

However, his knowledge of Paralympic rowing reignited his determination. By 2019, after rigorous training, he earned a place on the U.S. Paralympic team.

Notably, Vogt stands out among his Paralympic teammates due to his age. While most of his teammates are in their early to mid-20s, he is preparing to turn 50.

Vogt's commitment to physical fitness has been a cornerstone in managing his Parkinson's symptoms. His daily exercise routine includes rowing, weight training and cycling, which appear to have slowed the progression of his disease.

This aligns with recent research suggesting that regular exercise can improve clinical outcomes for Parkinson's patients.

Dr. Lauren Talman, an assistant professor of neurology at the Oregon Health & Science University School of Medicine and Vogt's neurologist, emphasized the importance of exercise in Parkinson's care.

"Exercise is a tool that may be able to slow or stop the progression of Parkinson's disease. Medications can only manage symptoms, but exercise offers additional benefits," she explained.

According to neurologist and [movement disorder](#) specialist Dr. Rachel Dolhun, who is also senior vice president of medical communications at the Michael J. Fox Foundation, exercise impacts brain health in several crucial ways.

"Exercise causes the brain to produce growth factors, sometimes called 'brain fertilizer,' which help create new brain cells and strengthen connections between them. It also improves blood flow and reduces inflammation," Dolhun explained. "These changes can help rewire the

brain, creating new pathways to improve movement and potentially slow disease progression."

Despite the benefits, experts say many Parkinson's patients remain unaware or skeptical of the impact of exercise on their condition.

To combat this, the Michael J. Fox Foundation created an exercise guide, written by Parkinson's and exercise experts, to help patients manage the disorder with exercise.

Vogt also hopes his story can inspire others to adopt a more active lifestyle.

"Seeing someone like Todd push boundaries can be incredibly motivating for other patients," Talman said.

Dolhun also noted that while Vogt's achievements are inspiring, people with Parkinson's do not need to reach his level of athleticism to benefit from exercise.

"You don't have to be an Olympic athlete," she emphasized. "Even small amounts of regular physical activity can make a significant difference."

And previous studies have suggested that physical activity could even serve as a protective factor.

"We know that diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's start decades before symptoms appear," she said. "Exercise can be a proactive measure, improving brain health long before a diagnosis. It's never too early or too late to start."

As Vogt prepares for the Paralympics in Paris, he is aware of the progressive nature of his disease. He plans to retire from competitive

rowing after the summer games, turning 50 on the day of his final race.

Post-retirement, Vogt said he hopes to stay active through coaching, writing or motivational speaking.

"I don't know what the future holds," Vogt said. "But I plan to keep moving forward and find new ways to stay engaged and active."

Talman added that, "Todd is not just a remarkable athlete, but an inspiration to many. I will be cheering for him as a fan this summer in Paris, proud of how far he has come and excited to see what he accomplishes next."

More information: The National Institute on Aging has more on [Parkinson's disease](#).

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