

Local athletes hear from Olympian and Pan Am medalist

By Bill Rea

Members of 310 running in Bolton received an inspirational message about the sport recently from an expert.

Olympic 400-metre hurdler Sarah Wells was on hand with some reflections about her running career.

Wells, 26, originally from Markham, competed in the 2012 Olympic Games in London, where she made it in the top 24 in the world. She won the silver medal in the 400 metres hurdles at last year's 2015 Pan American Games.

She wasn't in her best form for the visit, having torn a hamstring the week before. But she was still upbeat for her young audience. She said she got her start in track and field in high school. A friend was going out for the team, and Wells thought it looked like fun, so she went too.

"Fortunately, I found hurdles," she said, adding one nice thing about them is they offer a distraction from worrying how much farther she still has to run.

Wells said she's still considered at Olympic standard, but she still has to place in the top three at Olympic tryouts to prove that she can still compete at that level, and handle the pressure.

The torn hamstring came late in a work out. Her coach had noticed a problem and suggested she end things a little early. "I should have listened to my coach," she remarked, as she urged the audience to keep that in mind. "You have to have the drive, but if you know you're hurting, it's probably best to do less."

She said she has many happy memories of last year's Pan Am Games. The Athletes' Village reminded her a lot of the one that had been in London. There was a wide variety of food available there, and she also got the chance to see and meet many of the athletes. She also remembered it was very windy the day of her race. "It was just a wind tunnel down the back stretch," she said, adding it affected the number of strides she took between hurdles.

She also said she made a last-minute decision to switch her blocks after the warm-up, and she credited that decision for getting her the silver.

But she said it was competing in London that provided her favorite race memory. There were some 80,000 people in the stands, and she was used to racing in front of crowds that consisted mainly of parents. The crowd was roaring during the race. Wells said she's usually able to tune out all noise during a race. "That was hard to ignore," she said.

The crowd got louder in the straight, as she was battling an British woman. "Just pretend that's for you," she remembered thinking. The sport requires a lot of discipline if one is going to be successful, Wells said. That means getting good at overcoming obstacles, as well as setting and meeting goals. She added it takes a lot of sacrifices to go after a goal that one is not even sure is going to be there. She urged the younger folks to look at them not as sacrifices, but rather choices they make to help them reach a goal. She said those choices she made when she was younger allowed her to accomplish what she has.

Wells said she trains six days per week, putting in about five hours a day. She also stressed the importance of rest, and making sure it's appropriate. She usually takes Sundays off. "I do my best to rest that day," she said.



Olympic and Pan Am 400-metre hurdler Sarah Wells talked to members of 310 running in Bolton.