

The Fast Life of Oscar Pistorius



Pieter Hugo for The New York Times

Pistorius preparing to train at the University of Pretoria, in South Africa.

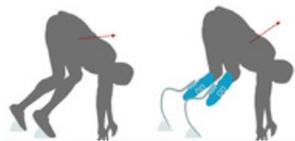
By MICHAEL SOKOLOVE
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Oscar Pistorius trains inside a converted garage at the home of his personal trainer, a former professional rugby player. Iron pull-up bars and a variety of ropes and pulleys are bolted to brick walls. Free weights are lined up on the floor, along with hammered-together wooden boxes that serve as platforms for step-ups and standing jumps. Some of the equipment is clamped to an exterior wall of the garage, opposite an uncovered patio; when it rains, athletes just carry on and get soaked. "It's old-school," Pistorius said as we drove up to the place early one morning. "Some of the guys who train here, they bang it so hard, they often get sick in the garden. Nobody judges them."

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Oscar Pistorius Runs

I visited with Pistorius last month in Pretoria, South Africa, where he was born 25 years ago without a fibula in either of his legs. (The fibula runs between the knee and ankle, beside the tibia.) His parents yielded to doctors' recommendations that his lower legs should be amputated, and at 11 months, they were cut off just below the knee. At 13 months, he was fitted with prostheses. At 17 months, he was walking. Now he is among the top-ranked 400-meter runners in the world and a favorite to qualify for the 2012 London Olympics this summer. If he achieves this goal, he will be the first person without intact biological legs to compete in an Olympic running event. If he runs for South Africa in the 4-by-400-meter relay — and if Usain Bolt, the world-record holder in the 100- and 200-meter dashes does the same for Jamaica, as he hopes to — the finals of that event could be the marquee moment of the Summer Games.

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Pistorius between workouts in South Africa.

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Ampie Louw, Pistorius's track coach.

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In media accounts, Pistorius is often referred to as the Blade Runner because of the J-shaped carbon-fiber prostheses that he wears in competition. He has also been called the "fastest man on no legs." The nicknames accentuate his otherness, as if it is important to set him apart from the rest of the field. An article published by the Berman Institute of Bioethics, at Johns Hopkins University, speculated that Pistorius may be a "pioneer on the posthuman frontier," whatever that might mean. For what it's worth, a South African magazine recently anointed Pistorius the country's sexiest celebrity.

The artificial legs Pistorius runs on, called Flex-Foot Cheetahs and manufactured by an Icelandic company, have been a point of contention, and he has had to fight efforts to exclude him. But amputees have been running on the Cheetahs since the late 1990s. None have approached his best time, 45.07 seconds, in the 400 meters.

When I watched Pistorius train at the garage that morning, he had on traditional plastic prostheses that emulate the shape and look of biological legs and feet, which are what he wears for daily living and all activities other than running. For 90 minutes, he progressed through a series of pull-ups, push-ups and situps while grasping rings attached to the ropes. He looked like a gymnast. The exercises were meant to build strength in his core — particularly important for a runner who has no muscles or nerves in his lower legs and therefore must get all his thrust from above the knees. He executed a set of jumps on to a two-foot-high box, which I said I was impressed by, to my immediate regret. "That's not very high for me," he said. "I can do a lot higher."

Near the end of his workout, Pistorius put on boxing gloves and unleashed a barrage of punches at his trainer, Jannie Brooks, who held a pair of padded mitts at shoulder level. He looked adept at this, which made sense, since boxing is one of the many sports he has competed in — along with wrestling, water polo, rugby and motocross. Brooks told me he has worked with Pistorius since he was in high school. "He came around with his mates, looking for training," Brooks recalled. "He was just one of the bunch of them. It was six months before I realized he didn't have lower legs."

Any notion that Pistorius has somehow "crossed over" into able-bodied sport is inaccurate. When he ran in the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens, at age 17, it was one of the few times he had ever competed against other amputees. In fact, he had only recently even heard of the Paralympics.

Pistorius is the middle child of three, between an older brother and younger sister. He told me that his parents were not especially well off, but he comes from a prominent South African family, and his perceptions may be skewed by the fact that other members of the extended Pistorius clan have extreme wealth. His roots in South Africa go back five generations, to an ancestor who emigrated from Switzerland. He spoke English at home, but he converses

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Pieter Hugo for The New York Times

Pistorius's everyday prostheses, not used in competition.

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with his longtime track coach and his manager, among others, in Afrikaans, the language of the Dutch settlers and of apartheid, which ended in 1994. He greets black South Africans in a few phrases of their native languages, or sometimes at security gates — there are many gates in South Africa — he'll roll down his car window, extend a hand and say to an attendant, "How are you, my brother?"

Whatever ease Pistorius felt in childhood was disrupted by family trauma. His parents divorced when he was 6; when he was 15, his mother died from a drug reaction following a hysterectomy. His father owns a dolomite mine in the eastern cape, and Pistorius is not in close contact with him. Pistorius has a story he likes to tell about his mother, a memory from early childhood that seems to sustain him.

He was getting ready to go out and play one morning with his brother, Carl. His mother, a school guidance counselor, turned to her older son and said, "You put your shoes on." Then she turned to Oscar: "And you put your legs on. And that's the last I want to hear of it."

A great many people want to root for Pistorius, to see him triumph over disability. Others look at him race and see an unfair advantage — one that goes to the guy without legs. His story raises all kinds of philosophical questions having to do with how we come into this world — our mix of advantages and disadvantages based on where we are born and what set of physical, mental and emotional resources we are endowed with. In one way, he is a terrible loser in this regard, lacking functional legs from the start. But he also comes from a nation with a breathtaking gulf between rich and poor, and if he had been born on the wrong side of that, into the abject poverty in which many of his countrymen still live, it is impossible to imagine him having the resources to have prevailed over his bad luck.

Pistorius is, as well, blessed with an uncommon temperament — a fierce, even frenzied need to take on the world at maximum speed and with minimum caution. It is an athlete's disposition, that of a person who believes himself to be royalty of a certain kind — a prince of the physical world.

Hanging out with Pistorius can be a great deal of fun. You also quickly understand that he is more than a little crazy. I asked him about the tattoo on his left shoulder, a Bible verse from Corinthians that begins, "I do not run like a man running aimlessly." He said he got it on a visit to New York. He was staying at a hotel in SoHo, and couldn't sleep, so he took the subway uptown and just walked around. "I went into an all-night tattoo parlor," he said. "Some Puerto Rican guy did it. It took from 2 a.m. to about 8:30. I think he was falling asleep after a while, which is why it's a little squiggly at the bottom. But I like it that way. To me, it makes it look more authentic."

In 2008, Pistorius crashed his boat into a submerged pier on a river south of Johannesburg. His face and body hit the steering wheel, and he broke two ribs, his jaw and an eye socket. Doctors had to sew 172 stitches in his face. More recently, while riding his dirt bike through tall grass, he clipped a fence and turned around to see one of his prosthetic legs swinging from a section of barbed wire, an unwelcome sight, for sure, but less dire than if it had been a biological leg. It was one of the only times that it occurred to him that having prosthetic lower limbs may confer some advantage.

The people around Pistorius worry about his risk-taking, but there's only so much they can do. His manager, Peet van Zyl, shrugged when I asked him about it. "It's the nature of the man," he said. "At least we did get the motorbike away from him."

Beyond his physical disability, Pistorius is unlike his peers in another, less visible way. Lots of athletes at his level hoard their energy for a single purpose. They train, they eat and they sleep — some of them, like infants, up to 12 hours a day counting their long afternoon naps. They become dull boys or girls as a result — or perhaps they are capable of such

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narrow focus because they were dull to begin with.

Pistorius's mind and body do not easily come to rest. For a time, he took the TV out of his bedroom so he would not stay up into the early morning watching movies. He programmed his phone so he couldn't send texts late at night. But he found that he just read into the wee hours. "I'm in bed at like 8 p.m., and I don't get out of bed till about 7 a.m.," he said. "But I only sleep for like half of it."

The competition season, which takes place mainly in Europe and stretches through the spring and summer, can be difficult for him. "When we're on the circuit, you wake up, you eat, you stretch," he said. "You go back to your room and watch a TV series or try to take a nap. You have lunch, go for another stretch or an ice bath and go back to your room. It can be very boring. I've spent like six hours on the Internet, just Googling, or watching stupid YouTube videos."

Pistorius has been involved in numerous businesses in South Africa, most of them tending toward the exotic. (He earns well over \$1 million a year, mainly from endorsement deals and appearance fees paid by meet promoters.) He owns six Thoroughbred racehorses. He was a partner in a company that services Ferraris. He bought two African white tigers and boarded them at a game reserve, then sold them to a zoo in Canada when they grew to about 400 pounds and he was no longer comfortable visiting with them. "They were really beautiful, but they started to get a little big for me," he explained.

On one of the days we spent together, it was rainy and unseasonably cold for mid-December, summer in South Africa. Pistorius went through an arduous morning workout, then a long photo session for this article. He still had to complete the second of his two daily training sessions, this one on the track, late in the afternoon at the University of Pretoria, where he has been slowly working his way to an undergraduate degree. He was tired and more irritable than I had seen him. He suggested we drive back to his house and have lunch, after which he figured he would watch TV and probably fall asleep on the couch. I climbed into the passenger seat of his car, a Nissan GT-R. I was already accustomed to his driving, though I wouldn't say entirely comfortable with it. The first time I drove with him, I peeked at the speedometer and saw the needle on 250 kilometers per hour. (That's 155 miles per hour.) People congregate around his vehicle — the "white monster," his manager called it — just to hear it idle.

"How's this car in the rain?" I asked. There was standing water on the roadways, and I feared we might hydroplane into oblivion. "It's good," he answered as he accelerated and my neck snapped back against the headrest. "It's a very heavy car, which is helpful, though maybe the tires are not the best for these conditions."

We made it back to his house, which is built in a Mediterranean style inside a gated, hillside community. His three dogs greeted us. The house is expansive, with a dining room big enough to fit a table that seats 16. The bookshelves in his living room contain mostly biographies — Mandela, Marley, Dylan, Beckham, Salvador Dalí, Steve Jobs — as well an account of the Bernie Madoff scandal and numerous volumes on rugby and auto racing.

Pistorius lives in the house with a friend from high school, an engineer who moonlights as a mixed-martial-arts fighter. Pistorius had recently broken off a relationship with his longtime girlfriend, though another young woman was visiting when we got there. As he put together lunch for all of us — fruit smoothies, breaded chicken fillets he pulled from the refrigerator — he mentioned that a security alarm in the house had gone off the previous night, and he had grabbed his gun and tiptoed downstairs. (It turned out to be nothing.)

I asked what kind of gun he owned, which he seemed to take as an indication of my broader interest in firearms. I had to tell him I didn't own any. "But you've shot one, right?" Actually, I hadn't. Suddenly, I felt like one of those characters in a movie who must be schooled on how to be more manly.

"We should go to the range," he said. He fetched his 9-millimeter handgun and two boxes

of ammunition. We got back in the car and drove to a nearby firing range, where he instructed me on proper technique. Pistorius was a good coach. A couple of my shots got close to the bull's-eye, which delighted him. "Maybe you should do this more," he said. "If you practiced, I think you could be pretty deadly." I asked him how often he came to the range. "Just sometimes when I can't sleep," he said.

"We know that Oscar's a mutant," Hugh Herr, the director of the [Biomechatronics Group at the](#) Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told me when I visited him in Cambridge not long ago. "He's a freak, an absolute freak."

The use of such words as "mutant" and "freak," in relation to a man born with disabilities, momentarily set me back. But what Herr meant was that Pistorius is like all other extraordinary athletes — like a Michael Phelps, a Carl Lewis or a LeBron James — and therefore possessed of physical gifts not normally found in the general population.

Herr, who is 47, has been an important ally for Pistorius. He grew up in a Mennonite family in Lancaster, Pa., "a rather ambitious, adventurous one," as he put it, that set off on months-long road trips. By age 8, he had climbed an 11,000-foot peak in the Canadian Rockies. At age 17, he and a friend were caught in a blizzard while scaling an icy ravine in New Hampshire and spent three days in subzero temperatures. His frostbitten legs were amputated below the knee. "If not for what happened, I wouldn't be doing this," he said. "I wasn't academically inclined. My only goal was to be the best climber in the world."

In 2008, the [International Association of Athletics Federations](#), track and field's ruling body, deemed Pistorius's Cheetah blades a competitive advantage and banned him from competing against able-bodied runners. Herr was part of a team of researchers, brought together by Pistorius's lawyers, that challenged the I.A.A.F. after putting Pistorius through a week of testing at Rice University in Houston. He testified at Pistorius's appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, in Lausanne, Switzerland, which voted to reverse the I.A.A.F. decision.

Herr is not necessarily the ideal advocate for Pistorius. The bionic future he envisions — augmented human beings, guided by internal microchips, propelled by battery power — is precisely where the Olympic movement does not want to go. He showed me around his lab, "our graveyard of parts," as he called it. It looked like an automobile chop shop, except the components were of artificial ankles, knees and hips. It was futuristic stuff — joints with miniature motors and microprocessors. The best of what he invents goes to U.S. soldiers, returned from Afghanistan and Iraq with limbs blown off, as quickly as it can be manufactured. "A large fraction of my laboratory here at M.I.T. is attempts to augment human function going beyond what nature intended," he said.

From his place at the vanguard of prosthetic design, however, Herr is in a position to state with authority that Pistorius is running on old stuff — low-tech equipment well into its second decade on the market. The Cheetahs, of course, look different from "normal" prosthetic legs, but when you think about it, why would the best thing for an amputee to run on be something that looks like a human leg — yet has no muscles, tendons, ligaments or nerves?

"Oscar's prostheses are dumb," Herr said, "There's no neural command. There's no feedback. His legs are not bionic, far from it. I define bionic as something that starts to emulate physiological function." Running on the Cheetahs, Herr said, "is like running on a mattress. It's hard. It's not an advantage."

I wondered, then, how Pistorius has managed to rise to the highest levels of international track-and-field competition — to a semifinal heat in the 400 meters in last year's world championships, and to the cusp of London 2012. Is it an advantage, when he is compared with other amputees, that he has been in prostheses since he was a toddler? Might he have established new neural connections, a line of communication from his brain that gives him advanced control of his carbon-fiber prostheses, almost as if they were connected seamlessly to his flesh and bone?

Herr answered cautiously. “It hasn’t been studied, the effects of age and amputation as they relate to athletic performance,” he said. “Clearly, since his legs were amputated at a very young age, he’s had a great deal of time to optimize his physiology. So among a population of amputees, I would hypothesize that that would clearly be at an advantage.”

To understand Pistorius’s quest to run against able-bodied competition — why he was banned and why that sanction was reversed — it helps to know something of the mechanics of sprinting. The fastest runners in the world are the ones who hit the ground the hardest. Their feet are in contact with the running surface hardly at all, a tenth of a second or less at each contact. Once runners establish momentum, they are almost flying rather than running. The important factor is not how quickly they churn their legs, but the force, relative to body weight, they generate on the ground.

Pistorius cannot stiffen his Cheetah blades just before contact, the way an able-bodied runner can with his lower legs. They are softer, so his blades are in contact with the running surface longer. He compensates by repositioning his limbs at a faster rate than most other world-class runners. “His hip is a giant, giant engine,” was Herr’s answer when I asked why Pistorius can cycle so quickly.

After winning a gold medal at the 2004 Paralympics — in the T44 category, which also includes single amputees below the knee — Pistorius ran in domestic meets in South Africa against able-bodied competition. His success earned him invitations to major meets in Europe.

But in 2007, the I.A.A.F. instituted a new rule, ostensibly not aimed specifically at Pistorius, relating to running-shoe technology that employed “springs.” It then turned its attention to the world’s most prominent disabled runner. The I.A.A.F. videotaped a race involving Pistorius and had its scientific advisers analyze it. Several weeks later, Pistorius underwent tests conducted by an I.A.A.F.-chosen researcher at the German Sport University in Cologne. The organization then declared him ineligible based on findings that his “bouncing” locomotion was an advantage and that he required less oxygen and fewer calories than able-bodied runners going at the same speed.

An athlete, under international rules, is considered eligible to compete unless a good reason is shown otherwise, not unlike a criminal defendant who is presumed innocent until proven guilty. So Pistorius did not have to show that he was not augmented, just that the other side had not proved he was.

In his appeal to the Court of Arbitration, Pistorius was represented by Jeffrey Kessler, a Manhattan lawyer well known in the U.S. for negotiating collective bargaining agreements on behalf of N.F.L. and N.B.A. players. Kessler demolished the I.A.A.F.’s case, and it may not have been that difficult to do so. “All of it was pretty much nonsense,” Herr said of the I.A.A.F.’s conclusions. Another member of the team that tested Pistorius in Houston, Peter Weyand, a professor of applied physiology and biomechanics at Southern Methodist University, put it differently. “They brought the wrong scientific case forward,” he told me.

The unanimous verdict of the three arbitrators said that the data assembled from Pistorius at Rice showed that he used “the same oxygen amounts” and “fatigued normally.” It criticized the I.A.A.F. for seeking out possible isolated advantages that Pistorius derived from his prostheses while disregarding disadvantages — for example, his slow starts because he cannot burst from the starting blocks as quickly as his competitors. The correct measure for determining his eligibility, it said, should be whether he has an “overall net advantage” over the whole of the race. On the question of whether the Cheetah blades are springs, the arbitrators wrote, “A natural human leg is itself a spring.” The report was most critical of the I.A.A.F. process itself, which it said went “off the rails” and all but called it a kangaroo court.

The ruling might have more definitively quieted questions about Pistorius except for one thing — a fissure on his team of scientists, with Herr and Weyand on opposite sides. Both had agreed to study him with the understanding that they could publish their

findings in academic journals, no matter what the results showed. Their paper in *The Journal of Applied Physiology*, published in September 2009 — “The Fastest Runner on Artificial Legs: Different Limbs, Similar Function?” — concluded that Pistorius was “similar to intact-limb runners physiologically but dissimilar mechanically.”

That second conclusion — that a person with prosthetic legs would run differently than someone with normal human legs — does not seem terribly surprising. But the paper was silent on the larger implications of that dissimilarity, because Herr and Weyand could publish together only by leaving some things unsaid.

Since the initial paper was published, Weyand has been vocal in stating that Pistorius is at an advantage, a substantial one. The reasons he puts forward were not part of the rationale behind the I.A.A.F.’s disqualification of Pistorius — in effect, not among the “charges” against him — so Pistorius’s legal and scientific team did not have to disprove them at his appeal. The basis of the argument made by Weyand is not hard to follow: The Cheetah blade and its hardware are light, about 5.4 pounds as opposed to the weight of an intact leg and foot for someone of Pistorius’s build, about 12.6 pounds. As a result, his “swing times” — how quickly he can reposition his limbs — are unnaturally fast, “quite literally off the biological charts,” as Weyand (who did not testify in Lausanne) put it in a point-counterpoint debate with Herr in *The Journal of Applied Physiology*.

Weyand and a colleague, Matthew Bundle of the University of Montana (one of the seven authors listed on the initial journal article), expanded on this last year. “Mr. Pistorius can reposition his lightweight, artificial limbs in 0.28 seconds, and therefore 20 percent more rapidly than most intact-limb athletes,” they wrote. “To appreciate just how artificial Mr. Pistorius’s swing time is, consider that the average limb-repositioning time of five former 100-meter world-record holders (Ben Johnson, Carl Lewis, Maurice Greene, Tim Montgomery and Justin Gatlin) is 0.34 seconds. Mr. Pistorius’s limb-repositioning times are 15.7 percent more brief than five of the fastest male sprinters in recorded human history.”

The most provocative aspect of Weyand and Bundle’s argument — and clearly the biggest affront to Pistorius — is their calculation that the Cheetah blades, over the length of 400 meters, or once around the track, give him an 11.9-second advantage. That would make him no better than an average high school runner. Herr has dismissed this as a “back of the envelope” calculation, and in his contribution to the point-counterpoint, signed by four other authors of the initial paper, asked: “Would Weyand and Bundle predict that the world-record holder, Michael Johnson, would run 31s if he had both legs amputated?”

Weyand told me that he has enormous respect for Pistorius and his accomplishments. I asked him if he really meant to imply that Pistorius, unaugmented, is a 57-second 400-meter runner — in other words, a nonfactor in any international-level able-bodied meet. “The short answer is yes,” he said. “That’s the scientific truth as I see it.”

But Weyand’s calculations seem to construct an imagined athlete — a Pistorius, in all regards, but with biological legs. I wondered how that was possible. “It’s a fair question,” he said. “A lot of people say it can’t be done, because the healthy, intact Oscar does not exist. But we have large enough databases, enough historical data on other sprinters, to say that if he had had intact legs, he couldn’t possibly swing them as fast.”

Herr and Weyand, who have known each other for decades, disagree on some technical though possibly important points. For example, Herr has measured the swing times of an American sprinter, Walter Dix, a medal winner in the 2008 Olympics, as faster than Pistorius’s — an answer to the assertion that Pistorius is off the biological charts. Weyand counters that Herr did so using television footage of Dix’s races from Beijing, and that other calculations, based on higher-speed, research-quality video, put Dix in a normal range.

Where Herr and Weyand differ most is in their perspective. Herr is more willing than Weyand to view Pistorius within a larger cultural context. “In our society, we are trained to

believe in a very narrow sense of beauty and physical power,” Herr said when I visited him at M.I.T. “A woman must be shaped in a certain way. Smart people look a certain way. When society sees Oscar winning against that perfect athletic form that they’ve been told of, there’s a confusion in the brain that immediately goes: ‘He can’t be a great athlete. It has to be the artificial legs.’ ”

Herr is both a scientist and a designer, and as such has a deep interest in aesthetics. His goal is to make prostheses that “are so sexy, they’re threatening. We want guys at Walter Reed to be thinking, I’m getting laid because this thing is so cool.”

His wide-ranging mind has occasionally caused confusion on the narrow scientific questions involving Pistorius. He understands that the rules of sport require technology to be policed, but limits do not excite him much. “We’re going to see a point in this century where the running times, the jumping heights, in the Paralympics, are all superior to the Olympics,” Herr said as we wrapped up our conversation. “The Paralympics won’t constrain technological development. So what’s going to happen is the Paralympics will be this exciting human-machine sport like race-car driving. It will make normal human bodies seem very boring.”

When Pistorius achieved the time that earned him a place at last summer’s world championships in South Korea, one of his sponsors, the French perfume maker Thierry Mugler, offered congratulations by putting his image on a big screen in Times Square. He has endorsement contracts with several other companies, including Oakley sunglasses; Össur, which makes his Cheetah blades; and (of course) Nike. He has become a big deal in his native South Africa and beyond, though I never saw him act like one.

I first met up with Pistorius in Cape Town, about a two-hour flight from his home, where he had come for the annual meeting of Beyond Sport, an organization dedicated to using sports to address social ills. He was standing in a hotel lobby, awaiting what was termed a “site visit” to an impoverished area. But after an early wake-up call, he had to wait for close to an hour because the security detail assigned to our bus had gone missing. Having spent a good bit of time around venerated American athletes, I kept expecting Pistorius to blow a fuse, but he was shockingly unperturbed. “That would be lovely,” he said when someone offered to bring him a bottle of water.

The trip finally set off, and we arrived in Khayelitsha, on the city’s low-lying fringe — a maze of tin-shack shantytowns, the structures dented and falling in on themselves, that is home to about a half-million people. Pistorius walked out to an artificial-turf field, newly built by a nonprofit that was teaching life-skills classes alongside soccer. He made remarks to the local media, then quickly ran off and jumped into soccer drills with children from the neighborhood — and seemed genuinely disappointed when it was time to leave. On the ride in and again as we left, he snapped pictures out the bus window. “You can’t pretend this doesn’t exist,” he said when he noticed me watching him.

The next day, I watched Pistorius run on the track at the University of Pretoria, where he has trained for several years with Young Talkmore Nyongani, a two-time Olympian for Zimbabwe in the 400 meters. Both men are coached by Ampie Louw, a grandfatherly figure who has been training runners, both able-bodied and disabled, for four decades. “I enjoy the amputees,” he told me. “It’s very technical, though in the end, the race is the same. People who believe Oscar is at an advantage — it’s bloody nonsense. They didn’t see all the suffering, the battling for three months just to learn how to come off starting blocks.”

The Cheetah blades are meant for running and no other purpose. The first thing you notice when Pistorius wears them is that his balance is not good; he sways when he tries to stand still and looks for a place to sit down, like someone on ice skates who has just exited the rink. A running track is an oval — it’s not hard to understand why Pistorius has an easier time on the straightaways than the turns.

As I talked with Louw, Pistorius was working his way through a set of nine 300s, running

stride for stride with Nyongani. “Look at him closely,” Louw said. “You may not see this again, an amputee running this fast.” I asked why he thought Pistorius was so fast. “He can move his legs fast. If you can do that, you can run fast. It’s that simple, but it’s not simple to say why. Why is Usain Bolt fast when some other guys with the same physical qualities aren’t as fast?”

Pistorius is nearing the start of his competitive season, which begins in February. His mission is clear: Run faster than the Olympic “A” qualifying time of 45.30 in the 400 meters, and at the same time be one of the three fastest South Africans in order to earn a guaranteed spot in London. South Africa has no Olympic trials; the team is chosen based on times in the months leading up to the Games.

South Africa’s strong core of 400-meter runners stiffens the challenge, but Pistorius had to emerge from this group to get to the world championships last summer, where he ran individually, as well as on his nation’s 4-by-400 relay team. Pistorius could be chosen for the relay even if he does not qualify individually, but that route is not on his mind. “I want to write my own ticket,” he said as we left practice that afternoon. “That’s all I’m thinking about.”

The scientific and cultural questions involving Pistorius are not easily answered. One way to make sport seem fair is for all competitors to be alike, which surely disqualifies him. Another is to keep “enhancements” from infiltrating the sanctity of sport. But the boundaries on that front are porous in the extreme, and in ways we do not even acknowledge.

For example, the greatest player in the world’s most popular sport, the soccer superstar Lionel Messi, was a promising player in his native Argentina, but small. At age 13, he moved to Spain to enroll in the youth academy of the famed club Barcelona, which paid for treatments to address a diagnosis of growth-hormone deficiency. Without that enhancement, might Messi have just ended up as a terror in Sunday-afternoon recreational games rather than the world’s best soccer player?

Herr says that what will make sport fairer is “more technology, not less.” But that doesn’t really settle the Pistorius question, because no one is likely to want to trade his biological legs for artificial ones, no matter how cool and sexy Herr can make them.

Pistorius refers to himself as “a sportsman.” As we sat one afternoon in his living room, he talked about the inquiry into his eligibility in terms of a specific kind of self-discovery: is his presence on the track fair to competitors? “The purpose for me wasn’t to be able to say to everybody, ‘Look, I don’t have an advantage,’ ” he said. “I really wanted to find out, ‘Do I have an advantage?’ Because I don’t want to be competing in a sport where I feel that I’m here not on my talent and my hard work but because of a piece of equipment.”

Pistorius stresses that he is proud to compete in Paralympic competitions. But he believes the strongest argument for his participation in able-bodied events is his vast superiority over disabled athletes who run on the same Cheetah prosthetic legs in the 400 meters. “These are not guys who just came off the streets and they strapped prosthetic legs to them,” he said. “Some of them have been top athletes before their operations, and some grew up in the Paralympic movement. They’re guys who sit in the gym and go on the track as much as I do. They’re hard-core athletes, but you don’t see them running remotely the same times.”

Pistorius’s dogs — an English bull terrier, a very docile American pit bull and a dachshund mix — were at his feet, and he threw them chew toys as we talked. I asked what his goal was for the coming year and was a little surprised that his ambitions were not higher. He is aiming to run in the final heat of the 400 meters in London, after failing to advance past the semis at the world championships. “I can have my goals, and I can have my dreams,” he said. “My goal is to make the finals and improve my position. I want to run all decent races. I don’t want to look back and say I ran a terrible race. It’s not like at this level I can go out and run a low 44, just because I said this is the day I want to do that. That’s never

going to happen.”

Which is probably true. But also surprising to hear from someone of Pistorius’s hellbent temperament. I wondered if there might be an element of self-protection in his thinking. If he meets his stated goal, he would continue to be well compensated, well liked and respected. His good life would get only better. If he could somehow pull off a miracle and make it to the medal stand, there might be no end of controversy.

He told me that he gets no special thrill from defeating men with two biological legs. To do so would be to dwell on his own disability. “You have to move past it,” he said. “Everyone has setbacks. I’m no different. I happen to have no legs. That’s pretty much the fact.” So what does he think as he settles into the starting block? “I just try to get my mind in the right place and think about what I want to do in that race, how I want to run it,” he said. “And then I go out and bang it.”

Michael Sokolove is a contributing writer. His most recent book is “Warrior Girls,” about the injury epidemic among young female athletes.

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