



THE RIGHT TO MOVE

PIERRE-GUINEAU



ACROSS THE UNITED STATES,
AMPUTEES AND PROSTHETISTS
ARE FIGHTING TO MAKE
SPORT AND EXERCISE MORE
ACCESSIBLE TO PEOPLE WITH
PHYSICAL DISABILITIES.

by Meredith Sell

Sarah Reinertsen

COURTESY OF OSSUR



NICOLE VER KUILEN couldn't believe what her physical therapist had just told her. In the middle of training for her first half marathon, the 24-year-old had "run my pelvis out of alignment, because I was running on a walking prosthesis, which is like running on a brick," says Ver Kuilen, who lost her lower left leg to bone cancer at age 10. She was in excruciating pain, and now her physical therapist was ordering her to stop running altogether.

"That can't be the solution," Ver Kuilen remembers thinking. "I'm so young."

This was in 2016. Ver Kuilen knew about running blades, but her insurance wouldn't cover one. Since elementary school, she'd made do with a standard walking prosthesis. When she started running recreationally in high school, her prosthetic foot would break about every six months (it was supposed to last three years), and now her body was feeling the impact from years of pounding on her left side and compensating with her right. But she didn't want to stop running.

She went to her prosthetist and asked if they could make a leg that her insurance would cover that would work better for running. "We went through 26 appointments over the course of an entire year, just trying different things," she says, "and I ended up with the same exact prosthesis that I'd had for the past five previous years."

ACROSS THE UNITED STATES, amputees and people with limb differences have long faced obstacles getting the prosthetic care they need. Before the Affordable Care Act (ACA) passed in 2010, insurance coverage for everyday prosthetics was hit or miss, with some policies only covering a certain dollar amount while others only covered one limb per lifetime, and still others didn't cover prosthetics at all.

The ACA required prosthetics coverage, but it didn't define a standard of care, so coverage varies widely from state to state. The default is for amputees to get one device at a time per limb, but there's no such thing as an all-in-one prosthetic. "Although prosthetics have advanced quite a bit since, you know, the Civil War ... they are still nothing in comparison to the human body," Ver Kuilen says. "Just one device can't replace what the human body can do."



Nicole Ver Kuilen

Activity prosthetics are designed for the unique biomechanical requirements of different sports. A walking prosthesis is light, stiff, and offers little, if any, energy return, while running blades provide bounce, absorbing and returning force to propel the user forward. Weightlifting legs are denser to withstand heavy loads. There are also cycling, climbing, snowboarding, and equestrian legs, and other options for upper-limb amputees.

Many amputees rely on grants from charities to cover their activity prosthetics, which can cost anywhere from \$3,000 to \$70,000, or even into the low six figures, depending on the technology. Paralympian sprinter Femita Ayanbeku, who lost her leg at age 11, received her first blade 10 years ago, when she was 23, from the Challenged Athletes Foun-

"Although prosthetics have advanced quite a bit ... they are still nothing in comparison to the human body. Just one device can't replace what the human body can do."

dation (CAF), one of the largest such organizations. That blade kicked off her running career, leading her to compete in three Paralympic Games to date.

Ver Kuilen also received her first blade from CAF, but she didn't go through the application process. Instead, she caught the organization's eye in 2017, when she completed a 1,500-mile triathlon down the West Coast on her walking prosthesis. The point of the journey, which she called Forrest Stump (the same name as the nonprofit she founded that year), was to bring awareness to the lack of insurance coverage.

When Ver Kuilen ran on her blade for the first time, she says, "it literally felt like I had my leg back." Running no longer brought constant pain to the rest of her body. But her frustrations were redirected elsewhere: "No one should have to get noticed by a charity to get the medical care they need," she says.

Adults with disabilities are more likely to have heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—all conditions that can be prevented or attenuated by physical activity. A 2019 Diversity Inclusion in Sports Today survey by TD Bank found that four of 10 people with physical disabilities who do not play sports want to play sports, and participation rates could reach 50 percent if obstacles were addressed.

For amputees, having the right prosthetic is a major obstacle. After completing Forrest Stump, Ver Kuilen was dead set on doing something about it.

The following spring, she completed a fellowship with the National Association for the Advancement of Orthotics and Prosthetics (NAAOP), an advocacy organization that has pushed for federal policies since 1987. Ver Kuilen's interest in

activity prosthetics was new for the group, a stunning realization that confirmed she needed to keep working on the issue.

In 2020, she created a petition to Congress called "The Rights of Americans with Disabilities to Exercise" and drew attention to it by organizing a virtual race called We Just Felt Like Running. More than 9,000 people signed the petition on Change.org and over 600 raced, but it didn't seem like her efforts were making a difference.

Then, in 2022, Ver Kuilen heard a law had passed in Maine extending coverage to activity prosthetics for kids.

JORDAN SIMPSON, a social work student at the University of New England, was an amputee from birth. Amniotic bands wrapped around her right leg and the fingers of her right hand during her mother's pregnancy, causing in utero amputations. As a preteen in Massachusetts, she'd wanted to run track, but her prosthetics company kept brushing off her request for a running blade.

It wasn't until she was 13 that she got her first blade and ran for the first time in her life. She joined the track team and was able to more fully participate in gym class, exploring movements that were impossible or uncomfortable on her walking leg.

In 2019, her junior year of college, Simpson was working on a project for her policy and advocacy class focused on prosthetics and how recreation isn't considered medically necessary when Maine State Representative Colleen Madigan visited the class. After learning about Simpson's project, Madigan was shocked. With Simpson's help, she took the issue into the next legislative session. Compromises and concerns around cost led to the bill only applying to minors—but it passed.

Meanwhile, Ver Kuilen was working for the American Orthotic and Prosthetic Association (AOPA) and collaborating with the NAAOP on a policy proposal tied to the importance of physical activity. The Maine bill seemed like the exact strategy needed: narrow the focus to coverage for kids at the state level. Ver Kuilen started building the campaign as So Kids Can Move, but within a year, the vision expanded.



COURTESY OF NICOLE VER KUILEN; OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF OSSUR



The push came from Kyle Stepp, an above-the-knee amputee living in New Mexico who had recently received a blade through the Move for Jenn Foundation, a nonprofit that helps people who have lost a limb to bone cancer purchase activity prosthetics. Shortly after qualifying for USA Triathlon, he met a double amputee in a wheelchair at a gas station. “I wish I had one of those fancy legs,” the man told him, and Stepp immediately felt a burden to make that possible. He reached out to Ver Kuilen, whom he’d met through his prosthetist. She told him about So Kids Can Move.

“Why can’t we do all ages?” he asked.

Working together, the initiative took a new name: So Every BODY Can Move (SEBCM). Stepp assembled a small group of amputees and prosthetists to go door-to-door visiting legislators in Santa Fe. In 2023, New Mexico, Colorado, Arkansas, and Illinois all passed some form of the legislation. New Mexico’s was the most comprehensive, including all insurance plans the state could regulate; only Medicare, federal plans, and the self-funded plans of large private employers weren’t affected.

In Ver Kuilen’s childhood state, the Minnesota Society of Orthotists, Prosthetists, and Pedorthists (MSOPP), which had advocated for insurance fairness for 20 years and previously passed two unrelated bills, took notice of the other legislatures’ successes. MSOPP combined the broad scope of New Mexico’s bill with Arkansas’ coverage of showering and bathing devices. The bill passed on the last day of the 2024 session. “At the time, it was the most comprehensive orthotic and prosthetic access-to-care bill that became a law in the United States,” says Teri Kuffel, executive director of AOPA.

SEBCM has spread across the country since then, often with amputees and professional groups of prosthetists taking the lead. As more states propose bills, SEBCM compiles insights and provides direction to those on the local level. “In every state and in every hearing and in every committee markup, we learn so much that we can then share with our other states and our other leaders,” says Annika Berlin, SEBCM’s grassroots advocacy manager.

By early 2026, 12 states had passed a version of SEBCM legislation and more had taken up the cause. This year, a record 24 states are working on bills. Some, like Georgia, are adding to existing laws, while others, like Massachusetts, are proposing changes for the first time. Not every bill will pass and some have already died, but the sheer amount of activity bodes well for SEBCM’s goal of passing legislation in 28 states by 2028, when the Paralympic Games will take place in the U.S. Once there’s enough support on the state level, SEBCM plans to push for federal legislation.

“No one should have to get noticed by a charity to get the medical care they need.”



Femita Ayanbeku

TOM DULAT VIA GETTY IMAGES

COURTESY OF ÖSSUR



IN 2023, AFTER seven years of chronic pain from a rock climbing accident that shattered her ankle, Danielle Cummings became a lower leg amputee. The same week that the New Mexico bill took effect, she was cleared for a running leg.

“I really wanted to be an athlete again,” says the 29-year-old, who ran 40 to 50 miles a week before her accident. The first time she ran with her blade, she felt like she was back in her high school running days. “It was very freeing. I finally have this thing back that I loved for so long.”

Before her amputation, Cummings’ disability wasn’t visible but even stepping off a curb was painful. Post-amputation, she’s been able to achieve far more than she expected. “I feel more

able-bodied than I did prior to all this,” she says.

Just six months after her amputation, she qualified to race at the 2024 USA Paratriathlon National Championships. She won, and then took second place at the 2025 World Triathlon Para Championships. She ended 2025 ranked seventh in the world.

She credits the legislation that SEBCM passed in New Mexico for how quickly she was able to compete on the world stage. “I needed a running leg, I needed a cycling leg, and I could just go and get it because my insurance covered it. I didn’t have to try to go find a nonprofit or raise funds or do a GoFundMe,” she says. “It’s really opened doors to whatever I want to do.”