

Russia-Born U.S. Paralympic Star Puts Political Tensions to One Side

By [The Moscow Times](#)

March 07, 2014



Tatyana McFadden says she feels a special connection competing in Russia. / Harry Alverson / Flickr

SOCHI — Faced with tensions between her birth country and the nation that turned her into one of the world's top Paralympians, Russia-born U.S. athlete Tatyana McFadden has said she is trying to block out politics in Sochi.

Russia and the U.S. have been at loggerheads in recent weeks over the crisis in Ukraine, with American officials and lawmakers threatening sanctions against Russia, which backed ousted Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich.

"I'm here just to compete, and I'm here for myself, and I'm here to represent Team U.S.," said McFadden, a cross-country skier who was born in St. Petersburg and grew up in a Russian orphanage before being adopted by a U.S. family and raised in Maryland.

"It's about concentrating on my results, my skiing and being really happy to be here. It's

absolutely gorgeous, and I'm really, really pleased the venue is absolutely wonderful," she added.

McFadden, 24, is a triple Summer Paralympics gold medalist in wheelchair track racing, but has spent the last year and a half in training to compete as a Winter Sports athlete in Sochi.

McFadden said Thursday that she "of course" feels a special connection with competing in Russia, and the Games mark a personal watershed for her.

"This is where I was born, but my home is in America. I'm really excited and my family's going to be here," said McFadden, who was born with spina bifida. "My birth mom's going to be here, the orphanage director, my cousins, so I'm really quite excited that they're all going to be here. It's the first time that they're going to be able to see me in live action."

She is ranked 14th in the world in cross-country.

McFadden's teammate Oksana Masters has a similar background; born in Ukraine but representing the U.S. in cross-country skiing and biathlon in Sochi.

"I'm not here to worry about the politics," said Masters, ranked 11th in cross-country, adding that tension had not reached the Paralympic village.

"I think it's a pretty happy family," she said. "Everyone's really fine, we're playing air hockey together. It's a pretty fun environment to be around, meeting new athletes and I think the politics doesn't come into it."

Masters, also 24, was born with multiple disabilities linked to radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl disaster and was raised in an orphanage in Ukraine before being adopted by a family from Kentucky, where she took up sport, going on to win rowing bronze at the 2012 Summer Paralympics.

Masters' first competitive event of the March 7-16 Paralympics is the 6-kilometer sitting biathlon Saturday, before she and McFadden tackle the 12-kilometer sit-skiing a day later.

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