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UK sculpture honour for Pistorius

20 September 2011

Wilma den Hartigh

British contemporary sculptor **Ben Dearnley** has created a bronze torso sculpture of South African Paralympic icon **Oscar Pistorius**, which will go on display in London as part of an exhibition ahead of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Pistorius's model will form part of Dearnley's series of 18 life-sized sculptures of celebrated athletes from both sets of games. They will go on show at the Avenue of Champions exhibition at **Salisbury Cathedral** next year.

The sculpture was unveiled by Pistorius and former UK sprinter Iwan Thomas at London's Trafalgar Square on **International Paralympic Day** earlier in September.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron, London Mayor Boris Johnson, former athlete and head of London 2012 Organising Committee chair Lord Sebastian Coe, and many Paralympic athletes were also in attendance.

Pistorius will be representing South Africa at the London Paralympics.

World champion sprinter

Including Pistorius in the exhibition was an obvious choice for Dearnley. "My sculpture of Oscar is just a small way of honouring his commitment to be free from his disability," Dearnley says.

Pistorius was born without a fibula in both legs. On recommendation of leading medical specialists, his parents decided to have his legs amputated below the knee, as this would give him the best chance learning to walk later in life.

Six months after the operation, Pistorius received his first pair of prosthetic legs and within days he learnt to walk with them.

Years later he went on to become a world champion sprint runner and the first Paralympian to win gold in the 100m, 200m and 400m sprints in Beijing in 2008.

His athletic ability has earned him the international reputation as the "fastest man on no legs". He runs with the aid of **Cheetah Flex-Foot carbon fibre transtibial artificial limbs**, which is why he has come to be known as South Africa's Blade Runner.

Art in motion

The Bath-based artist had the opportunity to arrange the casting session in May, when Pistorius was in Manchester for the **Paralympic World Cup**.

Dearnley speaks with great admiration about working with South Africa's Blade Runner: "I jumped at the chance as I know what an amazing athlete he is and what an inspiration he is to so many."

When making a sculpture of an athlete, the first step is to study them in motion. The artist studied Pistorius in action at the indoor track where he was training. "I see his running motion as a kind of flight, somewhere between the ground and the sun. His blades mean that nothing of himself is actually in contact with the ground," Dearnley explains.

He also had to decide on the best position for the casting, which is vitally important when working on a sculpture of an athlete. He wanted the Pistorius torso to reflect his movement, which is key to his success.

Pistorius was required to hold the position for up to 20 minutes while the casting plaster was applied to his body. The next step was to sculpt the torso in plaster and then get it made in bronze at the foundry.

"The colour patination of the bronze is sky-blue in reference to his flight," Dearnley says. Pistorius's signature is also engraved into the bronze, which shows as gold. "I polished a golden highlight around the top edge, which is a reference to the sun."

Pistorius has already challenged convention by running in the world championships against able-bodied athletes and Dearnley says he has no doubt the South African will continue to "shake up the establishment" with record-breaking achievements.

"The sculpture captures for all time a true fragment of the athlete, frozen in mid-flight," he says.



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