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From hidden hand to historic splash: The lone merit swimmer defies odds

Unrelenting. Paralympic swimmer Husnah Kukundakwe has made big strides in the pool, winning her affection and medals. She is the first classified paralympic swimmer here. PHOTOS/EDDIE CHICCO

BY ANDREW MWANGUHYA

At 18, Husnah Kukundakwe has shattered barriers in the pool and beyond – the only Ugandan swimmer to qualify for major championships on merit, not handouts. Andrew Mwanguhya traces her raw journey of self-discovery, relentless grit, and a call for inclusion that reaches far beyond the water's edge.

There is a moment in our conversation when Husnah Kukundakwe, eyes bright and voice steady, recalls flinging herself into the deep end of a kindergarten pool at just three years old.

"I just felt drawn to the water," she says simply. "Even if it killed me right there and then, I would still be happy."

She was speaking to me on my athlete-centric podcast, The Game of Life on YouTube.

That single sentence carries the weight of a whole career – one built not on privilege or pity, but on an almost primal love for the element that would eventually carry her name into Ugandan sporting history.

Kukundakwe was born with congenital band syndrome, a rare condition in which amniotic bands constrict foetal development in the womb. Her right arm stopped growing midway, leaving her with one functional hand.

At home, her parents and three brothers treated her no differently. Chores, rough play, and family life unfolded as normal.

First encounter with discrimination

The outside world was less forgiving. In Primary One at Sir Apollo Kaggwa Primary School, a teacher removed her name from a 25-metre breaststroke race, replacing her with another girl.

Kukundakwe watched that girl win – and then watched officials award the medal in her own name.

"It broke me down," she remembers. "That was the first time I faced discrimination and became aware of it."

Devastated, she quit organised swimming. For two to three years she hid her arm under sweaters, even while playing netball, football, and volleyball – sweating through games just to avoid the stares.

Revenge mission

Yet the water never truly let her go. By Primary Three–Four, she returned to the pool, this time driven by quiet fury. "I was on a mission to beat that girl."

She rejoined weekend sessions at Malta Swim Club, trained harder, and at the next inter-house sports day dominated every event she entered.

"I collected all the medals. There weren't enough for me."

She even out-touched the girl who had once taken her place. The victory felt like vindication – not just against one competitor, but against every whispered doubt. That triumph marked the real beginning.

In 2018, at age 11, she underwent her first International Paralympic Committee classification in Nairobi – S8 for most strokes, SB8 breaststroke, SM8 medley.

Seeing athletes with far more visible impairments competing at the highest level was liberating.

"I realised mine was minor." The sweaters came off. Confidence grew. She left Sir Apollo Kaggwa Primary School as its best swimmer – able-bodied or otherwise – and topped PLE with four aggregates.

Aga Khan High School welcomed her next. There was no formal scholarship, but coach Muzafaru Muwanguzi integrated her into Dolphins Swim Club, aligning training with the school pool.

National competitions followed; assembly shout-outs became routine. "They were supportive. I'd miss exams, but make them up on Saturdays."

Uganda's history maker

Her first major international exposure came in 2019 at the World Para Swimming Championships in London – on a wildcard.

"My eyes opened. I was swimming next to superstars, world-record holders twice my age."

Personal bests in the 50m and 100m freestyle lit a fire. Then Covid struck. Tokyo 2020 became Tokyo 2021, and the expected wildcard turned into a chance at merit qualification.

Five seconds short in the 100m breaststroke, Kukundakwe and her coach devised a plan – Zoom gym sessions at home, then pool work the moment restrictions eased.

At the Sheffield World Series, she dived in knowing this was the shot. She clocked 1:36 – one second inside the qualifying mark.

At 13, she became the youngest athlete at the Tokyo 2020/21 Paralympics and Uganda's first-ever merit qualifier for the Olympics, Paralympics, or any comparable global event.

"It was history for Uganda. It was history for myself."

The Paralympic Village widened her vision. "I saw how much support para-sport needs in Uganda." Back home, she began school talks, media appearances, and disability-awareness programmes.

The year 2022 brought the Birmingham Commonwealth Games and the Konya Islamic Solidarity Games, where she won six medals – the most by any Ugandan athlete.

She later stood before President Museveni, medals heavy around her neck, and felt every sacrifice validated.

World Championships followed, delivering her first final in 2023 – another national first. Paris 2024 was solid but left her hungry.

"After Paris, I had to make sure the next championships were way better."

In Singapore, she cut nearly two seconds in a year – "magical," she says, in swimming terms.

Balancing school and elite swimming

Her daily rhythm is punishing: pool sessions from 5–7 a.m., school by 8, another session from 5:30–7 p.m., bed by 10. Homework spills into Sundays and free periods.

Yet Kabojja International School, which took her on for A-levels after Paris 2024, has been a sanctuary.

"They said, 'We need you.'" Flexible exams, Saturday catch-ups, brand ambassadorship – support has been consistent. Mocks went well; she believes she is balancing both worlds.

At the centre of it all is her mother, Hashima Batamuriza – 4.a.m. driver, schedule manager, fiercest critic, and loudest cheerleader.

"She wakes me at 4:30 – 'You've come this far.' She's my best friend. If she could swim for me, she would."

Searching for medical answers

Kukundakwe's future lies in medicine – paediatrics or research into congenital band syndrome.

"Why wasn't it detected prenatally? Could anything have changed?" She wants answers beyond Google. But first: a Paralympic medal. "Bronze, silver, gold – as long as it's around my neck."

Progress, though, remains her compass. "If I cut time but don't medal, I'm still happy. The medal will find me progressing."

Where are Ugandan brands?

Sponsorship frustration lingers. "Speedo (UK brand) reached out before any Ugandan brand."

There is confusion, not anger. "I drink water when I train – why not a local sponsor?"

As an IPC Athletes' Council representative for Africa, she pushes for better communication, awareness, and accessible infrastructure.

"Stadiums need lifts that fit wheelchairs. Public places must be inclusive." Her advice is simple, forged in water and will: "Allow yourself to try everything. Find your passion. Stick to it. Work hard – do it to the best of your ability."

To society: "Give people with disabilities a chance to show their ability, not their disability."

At 18, Husnah Kukundakwe is no longer proving others wrong. She is proving herself right – stroke by stroke, day by relentless day.

Uganda has a pioneer in the pool. The question now is whether the country will finally dive in alongside her.

BIO

Age: 18
Profession: Swimmer, student (Year 13 – as of 2025 – at Kabojja International School, studying biology, chemistry, and maths; equivalent to Senior 6 in Ugandan curriculum)
Achievements: Only Ugandan swimmer to qualify on merit for Paralympics (Tokyo 2021 at age 13); competed in two Paralympics (Tokyo 2021, Paris 2024), one Commonwealth Games (2022), Islamic Solidarity Games (2022, winning six medals – most on the team), three World Championships; first Ugandan para-swimmer to reach a World Championship final (2023); IPC Athletes' Council representative for Africa.

