

Search •

News



## Para-cycling: the transition from acrobatics to hand-cycling

21.06.2013

It was just a matter of seconds but it changed her life. A fall from a trapeze in an Italian theme park in 2007 left Silke Pan in a wheelchair. When she came round from a coma, she learned that she would not walk again, let alone wow the crowds with her spectacular acts of acrobatics, trapeze and contortion.



“I always liked being in front of people, on stage, making them laugh, putting them through emotions,” explains Silke. “On stage I could be anything and lead the audience anywhere. I was so used to speaking with my body and movements. All my waking hours were spent concentrating on shows and beautiful moments.”

Although devastated by her plight, her love of sport very quickly took over, even while she was still at the Swiss Paraplegic Centre in Nottwil, where she had been transferred after the accident.

“Some very good athletes were training in Nottwil. I watched them and saw them giving everything they had, using their muscles and their energy. I like to see that.

“At that time I didn’t like my wheelchair. For me it was a nightmare and I couldn’t imagine doing anything I enjoyed in a wheelchair. Hand-cycling was something different.”

Her imagination had been sparked but she was not ready.

“I couldn’t begin at once. My partner Didier and I had a lot of things to sort out. We had been living in a caravan, travelling all over the world. Some things had to change.”

Not least was the long and all-consuming legal battle to get some insurance pay-out to cover some of the costs of treatment. Then they needed to find a new and more stable living environment, and a new way to earn a living. Silke had graduated from the internationally recognised circus school in Berlin which, she points out: “is a very good qualification but not much use when you are paralysed.”

Didier Dvorak and Silke only knew life as entertainers, and continued for one year with an adapted show which included magic, singing and yodelling.

“It was a good experience but I realised that I didn’t want to do this anymore. Life had changed. I had to do something else.”

The enterprising couple then started up their own business “Canniballoon”. Didier has a decorating qualification and the couple had already used balloon decoration as part of their show. Now they have a successful business with clients in Switzerland and abroad. This allows them to make a living and has enabled them to move out of their caravan.

*The time for hand-cycling could begin*

“And then the time for hand-cycling could begin,” says Silke, who had never forgotten the images of those athletes training in Notwil during the months directly following her accident.

Now Silke can be seen training most days along the River Rhone in Switzerland, her country of adoption. When the weather dictates otherwise, she has made the World Cycling Centre’s velodrome in Aigle, her training ground.

It was not long before her competitive spirit took over and she began lining up in races in France, Germany and Switzerland, winning nearly every race she entered. In June, just 13 months after first easing her body into a handbike, she rode in the German national jersey at the first round of the UCI Para-cycling Road World Cup in Merano, Italy.

Although she was not among the medallists (“it was one of my first times racing against Paralympic Champions. Wow! Respect!”), her performance was notable. Her upper-body muscle tone, remnants of her former career, impressed the classifiers at the World Cup. Her achievements in such a short time point to greater things to come.

“When I started hand-cycling just over a year ago, I didn’t imagine I would be up against the best in the world, racing at this level. I am so pleased to be here,” she enthused after her races in Italy.

“I felt I was in a prison before, and the wheelchair was a heavy stone under my body. I love hand-cycling. It has given me a sensation of freedom. Finally I can breathe again and accept my new body. Now I can achieve things with my body. It’s a great feeling.”