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Para-Equestrian Dressage rider stops by the AISTS ahead of the start of Rio 2016 Paralympics



Posted on 29 Aug 2016 – Lausanne, Switzerland

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Swiss Para-Equestrian Dressage rider, [Celine van Till](#) made a quick visit to the AISTS on her way to compete at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games.

Hoping to get more people aware and interested in the sport, Celine is helping to spread the word about Para-Equestrian Dressage through her own inspiring story.

It will be Celine's first time competing at a Paralympic Games, fulfilling a dream she had since she was a teenager. Her mother, Simone, got her into horse riding at an early age to cure her shyness. She quickly showed promise and eventually joined the Swiss national junior team.

But in 2008 at the age of 17, Celine suffered a major fall from her horse at a training camp in Germany, leaving her in a coma for a month. Four months after the accident, Simone asked her if she wanted to ride again. For Celine, there were no doubts. The day after, she was back on a horse.

“It was like I never stopped riding, but there was a special emotion that first time I got back on.”

Having sustained brain injuries, Celine had to relearn how to walk, to talk and to use her body all over again. She started writing in the hospital as a way to help retrain her motor movements. At that time, writing one single word could take her 30 minutes. After leaving the hospital, she continued writing every day, a page at a time. Eventually, that writing turned into a book, *Pas à Pas* (Step by Step), which she describes as “a message of hope to those who are going through the same challenges.”

Today, Celine has lost half of her field of vision, has double vision and sees everything in 2D. (She explains by joking, “it’s like I’m always drunk!”). But you wouldn’t know it. She graduated from her Bachelors in Management-Marketing, rides her bike everywhere, she ran her first 10km this past June, is a published author, and just finished up her internship at the International Olympic Committee. All accomplished by the age of 25. And, in a few days’ time, she’ll be on her way to Rio.

This year marks 20 years since Para-Equestrian Dressage was first debuted at a Paralympic Games in Atlanta 1996. In the discipline, there are five grades of classification, with Grade 1a classification assigned to the most severely impaired. Celine will compete in Grade 3, among an extremely competitive field of athletes. Incredibly, she’s riding at the same level as before her accident.

Although, she never lost the “feel” of riding, Celine had to figure out the exact mechanics of how to do it all over again. To support her riding, she uses elastic bands to maintain her feet’s position in the stirrups, similar to a road cyclist clipped to her bike pedals.

“When I have to stand up and walk, I need to ask my brain to move my leg and that it’s time to walk.”

After extensive therapy and training, the act of horse riding just flows for Celine. It’s not a conscious effort like standing up. Except on the occasion when she’s tired or unfocused. At these times, she’ll experience muscle spasms she is unable to control or her body won’t follow what she’s asking it to do.

To specifically ensure she maintains her balance and coordination – something she constantly grapples with - Celine trains five days a week on her horse coached by her mother, and hits the gym three to four times a week with a personal trainer.

“I have to work at it, if I don’t train my coordination and balance, it just goes.”

Despite Celine’s hard work, mental effort and determination, it is her horses that she attributes her recovery and success to.

“Horses are my best friends, my sports partner, my therapist and doctor. If I’m feeling sad, all it takes is 10 minutes with my horse to feel better.”

She will be competing with the more experienced of her two horses, Amanta, a 12-year old elegant mare with “beautiful paces, good muscles and excellent flexibility”. Whatever the result, Celine hopes to make the very most of her first Paralympic Games’ experience.

And, not surprisingly with her boundless energy and drive, we learn that Celine is already aiming for Tokyo 2020. For her, she’s committed to this as a long-term career and you better believe it’s just the beginning.

From everyone at the AISTS, we wish Celine all the very best at Rio 2016!

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