

glamour/**drop everything read**

Kgothatso Montjane, 25, is not only SA's top female wheelchair tennis champion; she's also an extraordinary role model. Meet her here – and then join us as we cheer her on at the London Paralympics!

“When I play tennis, my disability disappears”

▶ “I hear the thrilling roar of the crowd as I smash the ball to the other side of the court with all my strength. Along with the sweat and passion in the air, I can sense victory as I watch where my return falls. And then, suddenly, I hear the umpire’s calm announcement, ‘Game, set, match, Montjane’. I can hardly breathe. Is this real? Me, the disabled girl from Limpopo, who only took up tennis six years ago, playing in front of thousands of people? No, *winning* in front of thousands of people! I feel proud, happy and free... free from the disability that has defined me for most of my life. And I’ve beaten Aniek van Koot, the world number two, at the Japan Open 2012. Now, more than ever, I know I can go far at London’s

Paralympics this year.

“But my life has not always been filled with stories of happiness and success. I grew up in an informal settlement in Limpopo and my mom works as a high school teacher while my dad is self-employed. Their basic salaries have had to provide for three children – my brother, sister and me – and while we’ve always had care and love, we never had great material advantages.

“I was born with a congenital defect which meant that my left leg wasn’t fully formed. While I could walk, I limped badly and had to wear surgical boots. Eventually, when I was 12 my leg was amputated from the knee down. Of course, I had a lot of support from my family, but I became more and more sad

and withdrawn. I couldn’t join in the schoolyard games. I couldn’t even slip into the crowd and be like the others.

“Because of my limp, I really struggled to fit in and was teased by other children. So when I turned six my parents decided to send me to the Helena Frans Special School in Bochum, Limpopo, to protect me. I left home and joined this new community where I could be cared for and nurtured, surrounded by other children who also had disabilities to deal with. The move created a happier learning environment for me, but it also tore me away from my family.

“But the hardest thing of all was learning to accept myself. I battled to live with my amputation and the way it limited my life. Then, when I was 18, something happened that changed everything and gave me a way to achieve success and pride in myself: tennis.

“Funnily enough, I really didn’t want to play the game in the beginning. It seemed impossible. But a teacher convinced me to take part in a local sports camp and I really loved it. To my surprise, I actually won the camp



tournament. Representatives of Wheelchair Tennis South Africa (WTSA) saw me play at the camp, recognised my potential and took me under their wing.

“Now tennis is my life. It makes me feel empowered and confident; it gives me a freedom I’ve never had before. When I’m on the court, my disability disappears and I’m able to embrace my life despite its difficulties. Sport has shown me that I am in no way deficient or any less of a person. I also see how my personal process has made me stronger since a big part of my game is mental and I’ve fought a mental game with my disability for all my life. Every time I beat a top player, like Aniek in Japan, I become even stronger.

“I don’t manage to go home often and I miss my family a lot, but if I ever feel like giving up I remember how much it’s taken to get where I am and I think about my dreams. Right now I’m dreaming about London. Day by day, match by match, my confidence is growing.

“But I’ll never forget where I’ve come from and there are a lot of things I want to achieve outside of tennis. In between training and playing matches, I’ve studied hard and in 2010 I got my



degree in recreation and leisure from the University of Venda. I’m now studying business management at the University of Johannesburg. I won’t always be able to play tennis and if I get injured I need other skills. I want to be able to earn an income and to add value to society.

“One of my biggest goals is to go back to my community to run a sports programme for children and teenagers. I want to provide hope, to give other people the kinds of opportunities that

sport has given me and to share the idea that drives me: that nothing good comes without work, but if you keep working hard you will realise your dreams. That attitude transformed my life and it can transform other lives, too.

“It’s also incredibly important for all of us to know someone who supports and inspires us. My mother is that person for me – her love has helped me overcome my fears, she’s taught me to never give up and she’s always encouraged me to enjoy the opportunities WTSA gives me. I owe her everything. In the professional tennis world, my icon is Roger Federer. His self-belief and determination, regardless of the highs and lows he has in his game, is something I really admire.

“Now, looking forward, I know that the London Paralympics will be my time to shine. Representing SA, with all the diversity of our cultures and the historical journey we symbolise as a nation, makes me so proud. And the best thing? If I can do it, anyone can. If you really put your mind to something, anything is possible. That’s what will get me to London and that’s what makes a winner, whatever the score.”

Don't miss these SA stars at the London Paralympics



Natalie du Toit

At 14 Natalie lost her leg in a motorcycle accident, but overcame all obstacles to become a top SA paralympian. She won four gold medals for swimming in the 2008 Beijing Games and made history by qualifying for the able-bodied 2003 Commonwealth Games.



Roxy Burns

Roxy took up cycling in 2001, despite a rare genetic condition which affects her motor coordination. She made her debut for SA in Beijing in 2008, where she was placed sixth and ninth in the 500-metre and 3 000-metre time trial events respectively.



Ilse Hayes

This visually-impaired sprinter won bronze in the women’s 400-metres in Athens in 2004 and continued her run up the leaderboards in the 2008 Beijing Games, where she won a gold medal for the women’s long jump and a silver for the 100-metre sprint.



Zanele Situ

Zanele was paralysed at 12 due to a suspected spinal TB infection. At the 2000 Sydney Games she became the first black athlete to win gold and also took home gold in Athens in 2004. Adept at javelin, discus and shot putt, she’s aiming for gold again in London.



Philippa Johnson

Philippa’s resilience is astounding – she’s learnt horseriding twice; once after a car accident left her right limbs severely impaired and again after breaking her back in the arena. She made a remarkable comeback in Beijing, winning two gold medals for dressage.