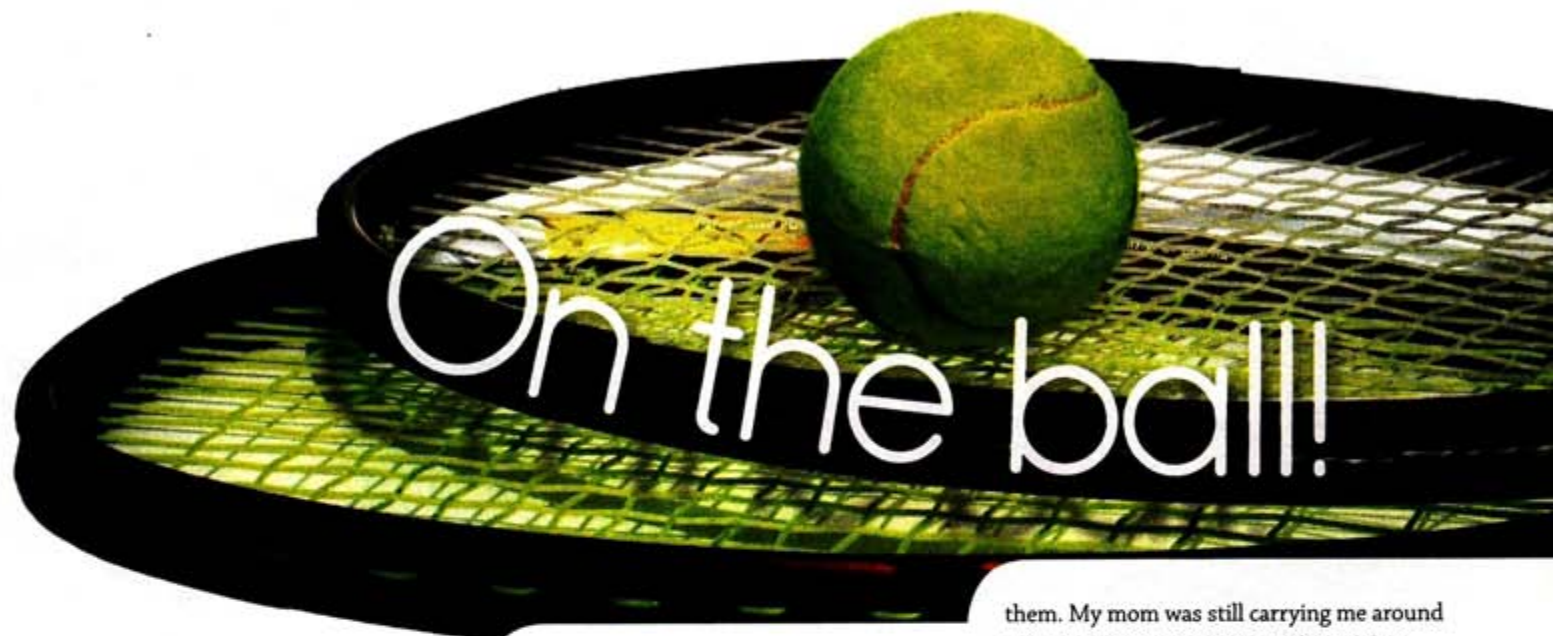


■ your life | rising stars



Three determined young tennis players are beating the odds, proving that disability is not inability.

By Vianne Venter

Wheelchair tennis is one of the fastest-growing sports in South Africa and across the world.

For those of us who struggle to hit a ball even though we're able-bodied, it's hard to imagine playing tennis in a wheelchair.

But, says 27-year-old SA men's wheelchair tennis champion **Sydwell Mathonsi**, 'Wheelchair tennis is very similar to able-bodied tennis, except we play seated and can use two bounces of the ball. All other rules are the same.'

Never give up, never lose hope

Sydwell was born with a condition that left him bow-legged, forcing him to spend the first five years of his life strapped to his mother's back.

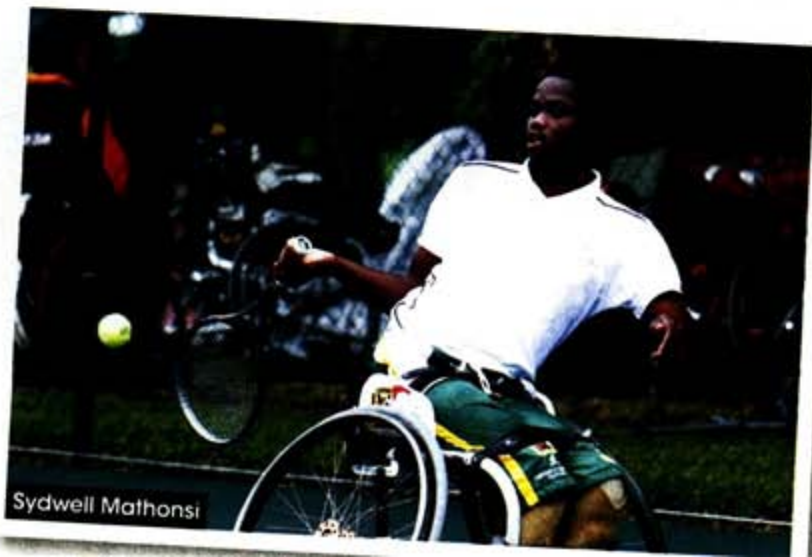
'At age 11,' he says, 'I was asked to make a decision no child should have to make – to amputate my deformed legs or try to save

them. My mom was still carrying me around and I was desperate to relieve her of this burden and gain some independence, so I opted to have the life-changing operation.'

Doctors amputated both of Sydwell's legs below the knee before fitting him with prosthetic (artificial) legs from calf to foot. 'Although something had been taken from me,' he says, 'I received something much more significant – a chance to walk for the first time. When I conquered the challenge of walking, I knew I would succeed in life. I would have been happy just to be able to walk and live a normal life – I never imagined I'd be one of the best wheelchair athletes in South Africa, and that I'd be able to see the world through sport!'

Today, Sydwell uses his life experiences to educate and inspire others. His story brings hope, not just to people living with physical challenges, but to anyone – able-bodied or not – facing a great challenge.

'Never give up, never lose hope,' he says. 'When the chips are down and you feel you have nowhere to turn, this is when your true strength comes through. With will, determination and positive energy, you can turn something devastating into something great!'



Sydwell Mathonsi

Wake up and chase your dream

Number one in the wheelchair tennis quads division is 25-year-old **Lucas Sithole**. 'I was 12 years old when my life changed forever,' he says. 'I was coming home from the shops when I walked past a stationary train that suddenly started moving back. I fell under the train and it rode over me. I lost most of my right arm, and both my legs. I was rushed to hospital in a critical state – I had lost a lot of blood and the doctors thought I would not survive. I spent a long time in intensive care and underwent several operations.



'I was very depressed and angry. I thought my life would be over forever – I wouldn't be able to play sports again; I wouldn't be accepted by my friends; I would be a burden on my family... I had always loved sport, and had set my sights on being a soccer star, but after the accident I could not see how it would be possible to live a normal life.'

But then things changed for Lucas. 'It was only when I went to Bumbisiswe, a disabled school outside Newcastle, that I learnt to cope with my disability and started to

regain my confidence and self-esteem,' he says. 'I had to learn to do everything again, from writing with my left hand (I was previously right-handed) to dressing myself. Over the years, I became very independent. I even learnt to climb a tree with one arm! Once I'd been in a wheelchair for a while, I decided to start playing sports again. I played wheelchair rugby, wheelchair basketball and wheelchair tennis, and have received national colours for all three sports.

'I consider everything a challenge and believe I can do almost anything I want to. I like to think of it like this – in life you have two choices – to sleep or dream. It is up to you to choose. Either you wake up and chase your dream or you give up and continue sleeping. You don't have to be afraid when life gets hard, just be happy you are living it! You hold the passport to your future.'

My disability wasn't a curse

24-year-old **Kgothatso Montjane** from Limpopo was born with a deformity of her leg and hand. 'I was fortunate that my parents took me to a special school, where there were other children with disabilities,' she says. 'I was a very active kid. Sport gave me discipline and respect for myself as well as others. I realised that my disability wasn't a curse and I accepted my condition. I live a normal life because I'm capable of doing what people without disabilities can do. For me, disability is not inability. I can still work towards my goals and dreams.'

Kgothatso has indeed dreamed big. She holds a BSc degree in Recreation and Leisure Studies, and is currently studying towards a national diploma in Retail Business



Management. Just seven years after picking up a tennis racket for the first time, she is the top player in the women's division, both in South Africa and Africa, and is ranked number 10 in the world.

'It used to be difficult when people stared at me and whispered,' she says, 'because it felt as if there was something wrong with me. But once people understand my situation, it gets easier; they get used to me and tend not to see that I have a disability anymore.'

Her message is simple: 'Give people with disabilities a chance to prove themselves – we are capable of many things that people think we can't do. Give us a chance to live normal lives. Stop feeling sorry for us and seeing us differently. We are also human beings!'

Watch out London, here they come!

With the Paralympic Games coming up in London in September, all three have been training hard and are ready to take on the world's best. We're cheering you on, guys! 🎉

DIRECTORY

Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) sponsors the Wheelchair Tennis South Africa programme with group coaching in communities to make the sport accessible and affordable. For more info, contact Siya Nkachela on 082 679 3772 or email siya@tennis.co.za