

Five Minutes With Celia du Toit

Pic: Rob Mowbray

It was a trip 14-year-old Celia du Toit had been looking forward to for weeks. The pretty Grade 8 learner was off for a fun-filled holiday. But en route the car veered off the road and rolled before coming to a stop. Celia was critically injured and left wheelchair bound. Today, 29-year-old Celia is one of the country's top disabled women's tennis players.

What can you remember of the accident?

I remember waking up in the ambulance, not knowing what had happened. I thought I was on holiday at the sea and lying in the back of my parent's kombi. I had suffered a very bad head injury. My jaw, leg and back were broken, with my spine broken in two places. I was the only person seriously injured.

At what moment did you realise you'd never be able to walk again?

Straight away I couldn't feel my legs or move anything from the waist down, so when the doctors told me the prognosis I wasn't surprised.

Were you able to finish high school?

I missed the rest of the school year but fortunately my marks were good enough so I was able to go back to the same school the following year. My parents were worried that I wouldn't be able to get around but the rugby team carried me up and down the stairs!

What inspired you to play tennis?

Two Wheelchair Tennis SA athletes competed in the 2004 Athens Paralympics, and I was inspired by their tenacity and the fact that they qualified for the sport and represented South Africa despite being in a wheelchair. After their return, I told my husband that I wanted to try and play tennis because I had played as an able body and thought it wouldn't be that difficult.

What has been your hardest tournament to date?

At the recent World Team Cup in Korea, I had to play as number one (our number one player got injured after the second match). The gap between the number one and two players are quite big in some instances. You always want to do well at these events, because you want to make your country proud, so I found the tournament really challenging.

In addition to playing tennis, you hold down a full day job.

I'm a banker by day and tennis pro by night. I work as the Regional Information Manager for Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West at FNB.

In tennis, where are you currently ranked?

I'm ranked number 46 in the world and number three in South Africa. Rankings are based on point systems and to get points you have to compete in tournaments. South Africa has six international tournaments a year. The more tournaments you play, the more points you accumulate and for this we have to play international events.

Next big goal?

On the tennis front, I want to try to qualify for the World Team Cup next year in Cremona, Italy. On a personal level, we are moving house and also hoping to start a family soon.



A car accident left Celia du Toit a paraplegic, yet today she is one of SA's top disabled women's tennis players.

This Day In Sporting History

July 23, 1931 – France announced they couldn't afford to send a team to 1932 Los Angeles Olympics.

July 27, 1982 – Russian foil fencer **Vladimir Smirnov** died at age 28 during the World Championships in Rome. His opponent's blade broke and went through the mesh of Smirnov's mask, through his eye orbit, and into his brain. Smirnov died

nine days later. His death was the driving force behind the significant improvement of safety gear in fencing.

July 24, 1994 – Kenyan Welterweight boxer **Wangila Napunyi** died at age 26 from injuries he sustained during a fight with **David Gonzalez** in Las Vegas. The referee stopped the match in favour of **Gonzalez**, despite **Wangila's** fierce

protests. **Wangila** collapsed into a coma and was pronounced dead 36 hours later.

July 29, 1995 – **Monica Seles** beat **Martina Navratilova** in her return to tennis.

July 24, 2005 – **Lance Armstrong** announced his retirement after winning a record seventh consecutive Tour de France victory.