

# I AM A WARRIOR



# How determination and a strong support system helped wheelchair tennis athlete Candice Combdon find her inner strength.

By June Jang

*Candice Combdon, 33, is a Team Ontario wheelchair tennis athlete who sees herself as a warrior on and off the court. Growing up with spina bifida, a condition that prevents the spinal cord from forming properly, she knew that her life experiences were always going to be a lot different.*

"I do see myself as a warrior. It does really resonate with me because I did have to fight for things I wanted to do. I had to fight to be included, to be accepted by my peers because the world is not always inclusive, right?" Combdon says.

Despite being a subdued and shy person who doesn't like to be in the spotlight, she says she becomes a completely different person whenever she wheels onto the tennis court.

"When I get out onto the court, it's like this completely different person shows up. And I'm this athlete. I feel good. I feel confident and I feel happy. I can let out a scream and get angry. I can get excited because I made a good shot. It's fun for me," she says.

Her unquenchable thirst and zeal for life have been evident off the court as well. In fact, she really started to live life without fear and focused on following her heart ever since she had her leg amputated three years ago after living in chronic pain for seventeen years.

"After my amputation, I was a completely different person. I was so much happier, so much more positive, willing to go out and try different things," she shares.

And try different things, she did. Since her amputation, she has gone cliff diving, climbed behind a waterfall, was an extra in a Christmas movie on Netflix and so much more. But the biggest change took place a year and a half ago when she made the

decision to take tennis seriously.

One of the key things that distinguishes Combdon from other athletes is that she grew up with little to no experience in sports. Although she spent long hours on the weekends watching tennis games with her mom, a careless but cruel comment from one of her classmates when she was seven kept her away from sports until much later in life.

"When I played T-ball back when I was a kid, one kid pointed at me and literally said, 'Ha ha. You can't run.' And that terrified me and made me not want to play sports until I was in my twenties," she discloses.

People who know anything about Combdon will unanimously praise her for her amazing work ethic.

Michele May, who has been Combdon's private tennis coach since 2019, says coaching her stands out as one of her best coaching experiences because of Combdon's amazing passion, drive and yearning to learn.

"She's so passionate and so dedicated to improving that she's well above most of the other athletes that I have coached. She just wants to improve every single day, so she'll go above and beyond," May praises.

May also says Combdon's willingness to improve has been evident in her unwavering commitment to her training. In addition to two, two-hour training sessions per week with May, Combdon also joins May on court when she coaches at Barrie North Winter Tennis, sometimes three or four



*Combdon with coach Michele May and sponsor Robert Somerville.*

times a week for three to four hours at a time.

In fact, Combdon was on the court – albeit on the bench – a week or two after her amputation to watch a wheelchair tennis session. Her determination inspires many, including Laura Wilson, Executive Director at the Ontario Para Network (ONPARA).

“It’s been so easy to get on board and want to support Candice because she has such a great attitude and positive outlook,” Wilson says. “She works so damn hard. Here she is now, wanting more and more. She wants to climb as high as she can, and we want to support her every step of the way.”

While Combdon’s first introduction to wheelchair tennis was over 12 years ago at a ‘Have A Go’ Day hosted by ONPARA (then known as the Ontario

Wheelchair Sports Association), the lack of readily available resources in her hometown of Newmarket at that time prevented her from training more seriously. Combdon says the most beneficial support she received from ONPARA early on is through their Wheelchair Loans Program. The program allows participants to rent costly specialized sports equipment for a low monthly fee as a means of reducing some of the barriers that exist for those just starting out in wheelchair sports. A new sport wheelchair can cost upwards of \$5,000, making sport inaccessible to many.

“I would say an opportunity to have a sports chair was most beneficial for me because they’re not cheap. Had I not had the opportunity to rent a sports chair, there would be no

Candice playing wheelchair tennis,” Combdon says.

In addition to providing access to equipment, ONPARA was also able to support Combdon in other ways. When the application period opened for the Canadian Paralympic Committee’s 2019-2020 Paralympic Sport Development Fund, ONPARA jumped at the chance and sought funding to support development opportunities for its female wheelchair tennis athletes in the province. Their application was successful and, thanks to the Canadian Paralympic Committee, they were able to send Combdon and the women’s National Champion, Anne-Marie Dolinar, to the 2020 Indian Wells Tennis Garden Wheelchair Championship in Indian Wells, California, in early 2020.

Combdon says her exposure to an international tournament and coming back home with a doubles trophy in her division gave her the confidence she was lacking.

“I just came back with this drive to work so much harder because I did so much better than I expected to do. I came home and I was like, ‘I can do this. I think I can do this. Paralympics. If I really apply myself, I work hard, I can really do this,’” she says. “You know, that belief wasn’t there before. It was something to say, ‘Oh, I would like to go to the Paralympics,’ but another thing for me to really believe that I am capable of doing it. And Indian Wells played a huge part in my confidence and my belief in myself to make it, for sure.”

Being well aware that there aren’t a lot of opportunities for female athletes, whether it’s para-athletes or able-bodied athletes, Combdon says the support she’s been receiving from ONPARA makes her want to work harder. “I wouldn’t have the opportunity to be where I am and to do what I am doing, if it weren’t for the help I’m receiving. For sure, I can work as hard as I can work but if I don’t have that extra support, I can’t go anywhere, right?” she says.



Photo by Laura Joy Photography



Combdon says her support system is the driving force behind her motivation to succeed. She gives credit to the loving support of her family, her amazing teammates who would go out of their way – even if it means giving up points – to help her become a better tennis player, and her tennis sponsor, Robert, whom she has come to consider as a dear friend and a mentor.

“I give my support system huge credit for me working hard every day because I know I’m being watched, and people are wanting me to succeed. And that makes me want to succeed because I don’t want to let any of those people down. They’ve all just been amazing. I can’t credit just one specific person,” Combdon explains.

If there is one thing Combdon would like to share with people with disabilities who are looking for a way to get involved in parasports, it is simply to take a chance and try it.

“I can’t stress enough how much wheelchair tennis and taking that one chance twelve years ago has changed my life completely. I am a completely different person. I am in a completely different place than I would have ever been in had I not discovered wheelchair tennis,” Combdon emphasizes. “It’s just been a monumental, crazy, positive experience for me, and I will forever tell people if you’re not someone who plays sports, go and try a sport because it makes such a difference.”

**Follow @candice\_combdon as she continues her wheelchair tennis journey and cheer her on along the way.**

## Public Consultation

# Alexandra Bridge Replacement

The Government of Canada is undertaking the replacement of the Alexandra Bridge which connects Ottawa and Gatineau.

Your participation in this public consultation is important.

**Tell us what you think by **November 17.****

[ncc-ccn.gc.ca/alexandra-bridge](http://ncc-ccn.gc.ca/alexandra-bridge)



Canada