

# I am a Warrior – Candice Combdon

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## I am a Warrior

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

[by June Jang](#)

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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 did have 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 completely a different person. I was so much happier, so much more positive, willing to go out and try different things," she says.

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

One of the key aspects that distinguish 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, I had one kid who 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 says.



Combdon (left)

with coach Michele May and sponsor Robert Somerville

People who know anything about Candice will unanimously praise her for her amazing work ethic. Michele May, who has been Combdon's private tennis coach since September 2019, says coaching Candice 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 says.

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 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.

"It's been so easy to get on board and want to support Candice because she has such a great attitude and positive outlook. 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," Wilson says.

While Candice'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](#), which 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, causing sport to be inaccessible to many.

"I would say an opportunity to have a sports chair [was most beneficial] because they're not cheap. Had I not had the opportunity to rent a sports chair, there would be no Candice playing wheelchair tennis," she says.





In addition to providing access to equipment, ONPARA was also able to support Candice 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 Candice and women's National Champion, Anne-Marie Dolinar, to the 2020 Indian Wells Tennis Garden Wheelchair Championship in Indian Wells, California this past February.

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.

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 a 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” she says.

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,” she says. “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 along her wheelchair tennis journey and help cheer her on along the way.

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**About the Ontario Para Network**



Formerly known as the Ontario Wheelchair Sports Association, our mission at the Ontario Para Network (ONPARA) is to grow opportunities for participation in adaptive sports across Ontario. As the governing body for wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby, and wheelchair tennis in the province, we strive to offer opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate in recreational, competitive, and high performance programs. We lead, develop, support and advocate for athletes, coaches and volunteers to build strong and inclusive sport communities. We also deliver extensive outreach and education programs targeting schools as well as individuals and clinicians at rehabilitation hospitals and the broader health care sector.