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Denise Castelli's sideline view second to none

Sep 5, 2011 | By Paula Vergara



Denise Castelli

Denise Castelli competed with 500 applicants for one of the 80 ball person spots at this month's U.S. Open.

Chasing down tennis balls at the U.S. Open wasn't exactly part of 25-year-old Denise Castelli's plan for this summer. Of course, the same could be said for much of the past three years of her life: not part of the plan.

In 2008, Castelli was a senior studying criminal justice at the University of New Haven. She excelled at sports, particularly softball. In April of that year, while playing in a college game, Castelli made a move — one that she had made a thousand times before — sliding into second base on a steal. Only this time, her right leg got caught underneath her. In an instant, her life changed forever.

"It happened so fast," Castelli said. "I went down, and felt this unbelievable pain. I knew immediately that I had broken my leg." She was rushed to the hospital, where doctors discovered she had a spiral fracture that required surgery to insert a rod below her right knee. Concerned but calm, Castelli assumed her leg would heal normally, and she could go back to an active life.

By August, her leg still hadn't healed properly and her family was beginning to worry the situation was much worse than they'd originally thought. Further tests revealed a serious infection in her right leg where the rod had been inserted. For the next 15 months, Castelli was virtually immobile, checking in and out of the hospital as doctors tried to combat the infection before it spread further. "I was in the hospital for two weeks, then I'd be discharged for a month. Then I'd be in for a month and come back for a week," she said. "There was never a time when I wasn't sick in that whole period."

Her prognosis turned grim in February 2009. "That's when I started to worry that maybe I was not going to be the same. Maybe my leg was too damaged to play softball again," Castelli said.

But it was more serious than even that: Doctors had to amputate two of her toes, and later, her foot. Incredibly, the worst was still to come. The infection in her leg proved to be uncontrollable. In November 2009, doctors had no choice but to amputate her right leg below the knee. Friends and family from her hometown of Netcong, N.J., showed support by staging a fundraiser and raising close to \$12,000 to help cover Castelli's mounting medical expenses and prosthetics.

After nearly a year and a half of suffering, Castelli was actually optimistic about her chances of a normal post-amputation life. "From the get-go, I knew I was going to be OK after the operation," she said. "I believed my doctor when he said, 'You'll be fine. Eventually, you'll play ball again.'

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SPORTSNATION

Do you agree with Adam Silver's decision to ban Clippers owner Donald Sterling for life?

- Yes, there is no place for such bigotry in the league
- I agree he needed to be punished, but a lifetime ban seems too harsh
- No, Silver went too far with this decision

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Long road back

"I had to be patient, even though it was really frustrating," Castelli said. Going through the recovery process was mentally exhausting. "There were times when I would think to myself that I wouldn't be able to do these things again. Even playing softball. I would always say, 'If I can't get out there and be as good as I used to be, I don't want to do it. It'll just bring me down.' It definitely took a lot of time and a ton of physical therapy."

Castelli remembers when she first began physical therapy, and the demanding process of learning how to walk again. "I had a cane, and I really relied on it. I didn't have that much confidence in my prosthetic."

“ If it changes one person's mind about the way they look at disabilities, it was definitely worth it.

”
— Denise Castelli

Talking with other amputees helped Castelli gain confidence in her new limb, but the physical therapy was grueling.

"In the beginning, I could walk really well for 2½ hours, then I'd have to take my leg off," she said. "Once I started building up strength in rehab, I could wear the leg for longer. And now, I can wear it all day, even lately when I'm walking around New York City and going up and down stairs."

Her reward for all that rehab? After more than two years of being out of the game, Castelli is back to playing softball, recently joining a local league to test her athletic skills. When she first picked up a bat, she admitted to having some nerves, but didn't feel any difference once she stood on the field.

"It was like riding a bike," she said. "I just started hitting. My first at-bat of the season, I hit a home run. I couldn't believe it!"

In June, an opportunity arose to handle a different kind of ball, this one at the U.S. Open. Castelli joined more than 500 candidates vying for just 80 positions at her first U.S. Open ball-person tryouts. Within weeks, she received news from the U.S. Tennis Association that she'd made the final cut.

Castelli temporarily put softball on hold to focus on her new duties. Wise move, since the job is harder than you might think.

"During warm-ups, we get balls for players," she explained. "Once the match starts, the work depends on the game. On odd game numbers, we sprint off the court; sometimes players will need more water, or [we'll] hold umbrellas over players. If it's an even game, the serve is going to change sides, but we don't leave the court. I either throw all of my balls down to the ball person on the other end, or they throw theirs to me."

At the tryouts, Castelli and other candidates went through a series of tests for arm strength, throwing ability and speed. "They give you three tennis balls to throw, then people throw balls at you," she said. After the tryout and callback, she still had to get through the qualifying rounds in order to make the cut for the main draw, which she did.

Coming full circle

For Castelli, who has never played tennis before, being a ball person at the U.S. Open has given her a chance to test herself physically and emotionally. "I get to prove to myself that I can do these things, but also to show other people that I am out there running, using my feet with able-bodied people," Castelli said. "If it changes one person's mind about the way they look at disabilities, then it was definitely worth it."

Fortunately, Castelli's softball skills — speed, agility and a good throwing arm — have come in handy as a ball person, working behind the baseline. "Physically, it's less difficult than I anticipated," she said. "But mentally, you really have to be in the game at all times. You have to know the score, and you have to know when there's going to be a ball change or a side change."

While the U.S. Open ends next week, this marks only the beginning of Castelli's return to athletics. "The Paralympics are always in the back of my mind," she said. "I would love to eventually get there." Her sport of choice: track and field. "I just got a new prosthetic running leg a few weeks ago, and I can't wait to learn how to use," she said.

In the meantime, Castelli is focused on first serves and net balls. This is one time she's proud to be on the sidelines.



Courtesy of Denise Castelli

Denise Castelli is playing softball again, but has a new prosthetic running leg and an eye on the Paralympics.

[+] Enlarge



Courtesy of Denise Castelli

It was during a softball game that Denise Castelli injured her leg, but she is playing the sport she loves again, saying it was like "riding a bike" getting back in the action.