



Like a cat with nine lives, Shaun Anderson has overcome so many obstacles that he's determined nothing will stop him from standing on the podium at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games.

Picking up a bow for the first time a few years ago, Anderson's remarkable progress led to him winning the men's compound open at the National Archery Championships in April. He is working towards qualifying for the World Para Archery Championships in Bangkok, Thailand, in November.

Anderson's disability is not immediately apparent but his left arm hangs at his side as a result of a motorbike accident in 2003. Defying the odds, he survived to tell the tale, and not for the first time.

Growing up in Boksburg and crazy about sport, he achieved

FULLY FOCUSED

He's had more setbacks than most but just comes back for more

WORDS: JENNY BERNSTEIN

national colours for roller hockey and represented South Africa at the 1995 World Champs in Brazil. Back home, while playing in an exhibition match, he was hit in the neck by the ball. It struck his carotid artery and caused an aneurysm in the brain which put him in hospital for months. He had to learn to walk and talk again, which he did in record time, but became an epileptic.

He moved to Standerton to get away from the rat race and was coaching roller hockey in Mpumalanga when he met Ilze, whom he married in 1999.

They had moved to Pretoria when the side-effects of the epilepsy medication caused acute pancreatitis and, during an exploratory operation, Anderson went into congestive heart failure.

Miraculously, he walked out of hospital four weeks later and weaned himself off all his medication. 'I just decided enough was enough. I don't know how I did it; the doctor called me a miracle child.'

'I was fit-free for two years and then I was allowed to get a bike again. I wasn't a big biker but it was my source of relief and a getaway from the world, and then I had my accident.' >

He suffered a brachial plexus injury in which all the nerve endings which conduct signals from the spinal cord to the shoulder, arm and hand were torn away from the spine. He was left with no feeling from the left side of his neck, all the way down the arm.

After a brief stint in Brits, the family moved back to Pretoria and Anderson was looking for a hobby to replace the fishing he had enjoyed while living near the dams.

'I was walking past an archery shop one day with my son and we thought we would try it out, but everyone said I couldn't do it with one arm.'

There is no such word as 'can't' in Anderson's vocabulary and he learned to shoot using his mouth. A couple of months later he narrowly beat his English opponent to win his event at the World Indoor Archery Championships, held in Pretoria in 2011.

'That's when I realised, if I can win this, I can go to the Paralympics. So I started shooting at the SANAA [SA National Archery Association] events and began training really hard.

'I got my butt kicked at the first nationals but then I was lucky enough to go to Morocco last year for the African Commonwealth Champs. The guy I was supposed to shoot against didn't pitch so I ended up shooting on

'EVERYTHING IN ARCHERY INVOLVES STRUCTURE BECAUSE YOU'RE DEALING WITH A WEAPON, AND IF YOU DON'T HAVE DISCIPLINE, THERE COULD BE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES'

my own, but just from the whole vibe and experience, I knew it was what I wanted to do.'

Apart from his three close shaves with death, Anderson was diagnosed with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and dyslexia at a young age. At one stage, he was on more than a dozen pills a day and has since become outspoken against the use of medication in children with learning problems.

He is the face of ADASA (the Anti-Drug Alliance SA) and gives motivational talks to schools as well as corporates and anyone prepared to listen.

Archery has helped him focus and brought a structure to his life, which he is eager to share with others. 'Everything in archery involves structure because you're dealing with a weapon, and if you don't have discipline, there could be serious consequences.

'Without structure, I just don't function, so I need to stick to a specific routine. In the morning, I get up at a certain time and walk 5km. I come home and help the kids get ready for school. Then I drop my wife at work and the kids at school.'

Both his children are at Rietvlei Akademie – a special needs school – where Anderson teaches archery to about 45 children.

His daughter Caitlin (12) was the national archery champion and his son Connor (10) came third in his age group this year.

'That's the great thing about archery – I meet people in wheelchairs or with learning problems and I try to help them understand they might be different but they can still achieve great things, and that's important to me.

'Going to the Paralympics is not about bragging rights. When I come back, people might just listen to what I have to say about people with learning problems and it will give them a bit of hope.'

Thanks to the help of his family, a couple of sponsors and some guidance from Tuks HPC, Anderson gave up work last year to concentrate full time on his archery.

His mentors have warned him not to expect too much from a first Paralympic appearance but Anderson has other ideas. 'People tell me not to even think about medalling at your first Paralympics, but I can taste it. If you don't have those dreams, and you don't fight for them, you won't achieve anything.'

At 40, and sporting a Mohawk, Anderson says he loves life and won't give up easily. 'I'm not a death- or thrill-seeker, I've just had things happen to me. I might look aggressive but I would give the shirt off my back to help a child, or anybody.

'I don't want to die soon. I want to get old and sit back and watch my kids go to the Olympics. I'm hoping to be the first father-children combination to go to the Olympics in 2020. They'll go to the able-bodied and then they'll watch me at the Paras.

'The nice thing about archery is you can keep doing it till you're old.' <

Bernstein is a senior sports reporter at Sapa and covered the 2012 Paralympics.

ARROWING IN

- > He shoots the arrow with his mouth
- > His bow weighs 4.3kg, which he lifts with his right arm. Once the bite-piece is in his mouth, the stabilisers balance it
- > His mouth action affects his back molars, his jaw and the muscle development on the left side of his face
- > If he errs slightly in his release, the string smacks his top lip or his palate and can be very painful

