

PLAYER PROFILE

SUZANNE EDWARDS

Suzanne Edwards, 30, is a rising star in the world of wheelchair tennis thanks in part to the high number of sessions on offer at Better, Sutton Sports Village.

After completing her degree in Economics at Exeter University in 2008, Suzanne wanted to continue her outdoorsy, sporty lifestyle and freely admits one of her main reasons for applying there was its proximity to Cornwall's famous surfing beaches. She relocated to Cornwall where she worked and surfed, splitting her time between there and the pistes in the winter months to be a chalet girl.

Loving the outdoor lifestyle and the freedom it offered, she eventually moved to Morocco where she worked in a surf school and it was here that one fateful night an unfortunate accident changed her life forever. A casual lean on a balcony railing, which then gave way, led to a fall onto a solid marble floor 20ft below causing irreversible spinal injuries. Following two days in a Moroccan hospital, Suzanne was flown back to the UK to a specialist spinal unit, via Chichester Hospital, in Stanmore and it was here she was dealt the biggest blow, the news from doctors that at just 23 years old she would never walk again.

Now in a totally different mind set, Suzanne admits the first few years following her injury and diagnosis were hard, "I could easily have stayed in a bad rut, but I'm lucky to have a close knit family and I needed to be ok for them. My family were desperate to help but there was nothing they could do to change my circumstances, so I had to change them for myself."

Her energetic pre-accident lifestyle prompted her to seek help and rehabilitation further afield by signing up to a strict regime based programme in China. "I have a great deal of determination and I'm not afraid of hard work so the Kunming Walking Programme offered an attempt at making my brain reawaken connections and recruit related muscles." said Suzanne. She in no way signed up with the hope of being cured, but liked the ethos behind it and is still today, one of only 3 non-Chinese patients to participate.

The walking programme in Kunming is 6 hours a day, 6 days a week for at least six months so involved a huge commitment and a great deal of strength, both physically and mentally. "I set my heart on going to China because honestly, I think it was too much of a good opportunity to miss out on. Anyone who knows me knows I'm pretty impatient and not just going to sit around waiting for an opportunity to come to me. Dr Zhu Hui, head of the Neurosurgery and Spinal Rehabilitation Unit at Kunming, has treated over 4,000 spinal injury patients since 1989 and is one of the best in the world, so I went with an open, optimistic but also realistic expectation. One thing is for sure, it was a massive adventure!"

Just 18 months ago, Suzanne was referred to Sutton Tennis Academy and joined in one of the Wheelchair Tennis taster sessions with Disability Coach Luke Mulvihill. She got the bug and although had played a little during her childhood, had not picked up a racquet since sustaining her spinal injury in January 2011. "I was the captain of the squash team at university and my Granny played for England, so playing racquet sports runs in the family. I was keen to find something that would challenge me and my life has completely turned around since I started playing wheelchair tennis. Luke has done an incredible job of building up the tennis sessions at Better, Sutton Sports Village and I now train there five days a week."

John Parfitt, a former World Number 11 Wheelchair Tennis Player, also trains at the centre and has been instrumental, alongside Luke, in giving Suzanne tips and helping to build up her confidence and skill set. "There's a good level of players to train with. I got funding for my specialised chair through the Dan Maskell Trust as one of the players I train with is a trustee. The goal for this year was to reach number 5 in Great Britain and 100 in the world, but I received news I had achieved this 3 days before my 30th birthday on 24th April. I guess I'll have to re-think that now!"

Suzanne is aiming to maintain her GB ranking and to see just how far she can go, but with her grit, determination and desire to succeed that shouldn't be a problem. She's competing in a number of ITF Futures Tournaments throughout the year, with her next international tournament, the Cagnes Sur Mer, taking place in the South of France in June where she will partner Jessie Webb in the Doubles.

"I didn't grow up expecting to be an athlete, but now I'm here - I want this. However, it's also very much about the enjoyment I get from playing tennis. Having such a good relationship with Luke makes it fun and he doesn't put any pressure on me. It's a good team here."