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MICHELLE SALT'S Remarkable Story of Recovery & Revival

Michelle Salt has never been one to shy away from a challenge. She's a 31-year-old small town girl who decided to move to the big city. That adventure pales in comparison to her steepest trial five years ago after a horrific motorcycle crash should have claimed her life. Her next big test, the 2014 Paralympic Games' snowboard course in Sochi, Russia, as a fresh amputee.

Salt was born and raised on a game farm outside of a small Alberta town called Calmar. From an early age, she had a passion for sports. When she was 12, she fell in love with snowboarding and chased the dream of someday becoming a professional snowboarder. Although she never made it to the pro level, she made history as Canada's first-ever female Paralympic snowboarder at the event's debut at the 2014 Paralympic Games.

Salt has always loved the thrill of speed... a blessing and a curse. She competed in natural luge competitions as a kid, developing her love of speed very early on. Her parents managed a luge track and at just eight years old, Salt was racing down the course at 80 km/h trying to avoid frozen hay bales and stubborn trees. Sometimes you win. Sometimes you lose.

On a beautiful summer evening in Calgary in 2011, Salt lost. It was June 27th when she took her new motorcycle out for a spin. She had been a proud bike owner for only 10 days. "I had this feeling in my gut that day that something wasn't right," she says looking back. Going up Cochrane Hill, she and her fellow bikers stuck together, but heading down, everything fell apart. "For some reason the guys decided to start speeding," Salt recalls. "I tried to keep up with them, but they were pretty much gone, and I was stuck behind a car. When I went around it and opened up my throttle, everything went wrong."

She lost control at 120 kilometres an hour. Her body and her bike skipped across the pavement until brusquely halted by a guardrail. Speed was now her only hope. Passersby rushed in to help. One in the group, a former nurse, knew how precarious Salt's survival was and told the 911 operator she needed an air ambulance if she stood any chance at all. The paramedics arrived eight minutes later. The emergency responders had only a handful of precious minutes to save her. Her blood streamed from her broken body and pooled around her limp frame. As they lifted Salt onto a stretcher, they lost her vitals.

Her shattered femur tore through her femoral artery. Both legs, her hips, pelvis, T- and L-vertebrae and clavicle were also damaged... 13 bones in all, one of which punctured a lung. She lost 28 units of blood in less than 36 hours, close to three times that of her body's normal capacity. Put on life support, her chances of survival were slim to none.

The severed artery and deep laceration deprived her right leg of all blood



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flow for too long. Despite all efforts to save it, including transplanting a major vein from her leg left, her surgeons could not. A new challenge... “my new life began as an amputee,” she remembers, “eight inches above the knee.”

Five surgeries in seven days left Salt held together with six bolts in her back, two pins in her hip and a plate in her tibia to sturdy the compound fractures. On the seventh day she pushed past life support with the tubes being removed, calling on her to breathe on her own again. Her weight vanished, dropping to 89 pounds from 128 in less than three weeks.

It was enough to sustain her. In fact, it was her exceptional physical shape and conditioning that her doctors pointed to first as an explanation for her survival. Salt was a budding fitness model, a form of bodybuilding competitions judging poses, muscle conformation and confidence. On the heels of a gruelling 16-week regimen of dieting and twice-a-day training, Salt entered her first fitness competition five weeks before her accident. She placed fourth out of 23 contenders. “I was so thrilled to finish in the

top five that I decided to buy myself something. I had always wanted: a motorcycle,” she says with an eye on the irony. “I’ve always been told that being healthy is important but I learned first-hand how really important it is when I was told that a huge part of my survival is owed to the condition of my heart.”

Perhaps “heart”, in its other iteration, also deserves some credit for Salt’s survival. “My family wasn’t sure how I would react to my leg being gone. I knew right away that I’d walk, run and even compete in another fitness competition and snowboard again! From the moment I learned

about Para-Snowboarding, I saw myself standing on a podium with a gold medal around my neck. Whatever it took, I would get there!

“When I bought my motorcycle, my biggest fear was becoming paralyzed,” Salt admits, “and but for the grace of God I’m able to walk again. After spending two months in a wheelchair I gained so much respect and compassion for those who have lost mobility. I’m blessed,” she confides.

Her family and friends were quick to encourage her “Can Do” attitude while she still lie in the hospital, and it was during that time that an unlikely visitor shored up her Paralympic dreams.



Photo by Alison Anderson, courtesy of the Alleles Design Studio

It was Team Canada's sledge hockey captain Greg Westlake who encouraged Salt to pursue the Paralympic dream. Three weeks after her accident Westlake was at a training camp in Edmonton. He was a friend of Salt's roommate and wanted to offer some encouragement in person. He rented a car to make the trip to Calgary to visit Salt in the hospital.

A snowboarder for 13 years before her injury, the creative and carefree sport has always been her passion, so it made sense to turn that love into a medal someday. "But snowboarding with a prosthetic leg, with a short residual limb, was a whole new experience," she admits. "I've always

liked a challenge and so there it was. Nothing's going to stop me from living my life to the fullest because I was blessed with a second chance that I fought hard for, and that's enough to try hard every day."

With her mid-thigh amputation, Salt not only had to relearn the movements of snowboarding – from primary weight-bearing on her front leg to using more of her upper body for turns – but learn how to use a "gnarly prosthetic knee," as she labels it. In her daily life she wears the Genium knee from Ottobock, but for snowboarding she uses a recreational prosthesis developed by Mike Schultz, a U.S. snow-cross athlete who lost his

leg in a snowmobiling accident. "You could say that it's a 'garage knee'," Salt describes. "I got mine directly from Mike but I believe you can now get it through a prosthetist. I'm the first female to ever use his knee. I can wakeboard and snowmobile with it, but it is heavy – 20 pounds of dead weight – and cumbersome and not very agile for walking. It's not made for walking. It is what it is... a sports knee with a shock absorber instead of a hinge... my leg for snowboarding."

Salt reveals that behind her front of bluster and bravado upon re-entering life as an amputee, she really just wanted to look normal. She just wanted to look good in jeans. Reflectively, Salt credits her prosthetist Taber Mellman for simply encouraging her to first focus on learning how to walk again. "I'm extremely grateful for my prosthetist and the role he played in getting me back to living a normal life. It's more than just componentry – it's psychological support too. He's like a life coach as well, always encouraging and very supportive. I don't think people understand how important our prosthetists are in our lives. It's not just fitting a limb. It's a very emotional thing."





Twist of Fate

Michelle Salt arrived in Haiti eight months after the devastating 2010 earthquake on a 10-day mission to help. She could never have imagined the fate that awaited her upon her return to Calgary. She was volunteering at the only orphanage in the country that received children with disabilities. She worked with kids with life-threatening diseases, kids in wheelchairs and young amputees. She was incredibly inspired by how these children embraced life and appreciated what they still had. It was a terrific lesson in the school of not taking things for granted.

Two months before she was to return to Haiti for a second time she crashed her motorcycle, resulting in the amputation of her right leg above the knee. She has not yet returned to Haiti, but plans to, with a promise from her prosthetist to help collect prosthetic componentry and join her in Haiti to help the kids who changed her outlook on life forever.

As heartening as he was, Salt recalls Mellman raising an eyebrow when she proposed her desire to return to snowboarding. "But he never doubted me," she assures. "He researched how we were going to accomplish it and spent a lot of time with me on the hill learning with me."

And accomplish it they did. Within eight months of her injury she was back on her snowboard. "It's pretty incredible that just two and a half years after I was lying in a hospital bed struggling for my life I was proudly representing my country at the Paralympic Games in Russia," Salt acknowledges.

Her goal for Sochi was "just to do my absolute best and learn from the experience," she notes, with her sights

now set squarely on competing at the next Winter Paralympic Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea, with hopes of a podium finish in 2018.

Salt admits that despite her evergreen positive attitude, she still has her ups and downs. Her healing process escorted her back to the seat of a motorcycle several summers ago. She bought another bike but sold it after just one ride. "I realized that it just wasn't worth the risk anymore. My prosthetic knee cost me \$60,000. If somebody hits me and my 500-pound motorcycle crushes it, I couldn't live without it. And if I crush my good leg, I'm not going to the Paralympics again. I needed to get back on the horse to realize that. It was one very expensive ride," she chuckles.



Her zest for life and desire for adventure has led Salt to many wonderful experiences both at home and abroad. Salt is a licensed Realtor in Calgary and a motivational speaker. She also enjoys wall-climbing, wakeboarding, golfing, volleyball, kayaking, horseback riding and loves the backcountry.

In November 2014 Salt walked the fitness competition stage in Calgary again, placing an impressive ninth out of 19 fellow bikini contestants. Her "before and after" comparison picture went viral reaching millions and was shared over 7,000 times. And as Salt sums: "the crash left more than an amputation. It was a new beginning, giving me more drive, more focus, and more determination than ever before."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Double-arm amputee and three-time Paralympian Jeff Tiessen is founder and president of Disability Today Publishing Group. As a



book and magazine publisher, Tiessen's work focuses on providing others with disabilities with tools and ideas for healthy, active living. As executive producer of the Disability Today Network, he has created a one-of-its-kind online information village for the greater disability community. An award-winning journalist and inductee into the Canadian Disability Hall of Fame, he is a respected advocate and sought-after public speaker.