

### **Beat Thöni: Foothold with deep roots**

Beat Thöni has been paralyzed since an alpine wrestling accident in 1960 despite of this; he copes with his life with confidence and tremendous fortitude.

For the ride in the pony trap from Wyler to the Brünig, five-year-old Beat is allowed to sit up next to the driver. He is terribly excited and rubs nervously on his Sunday shorts. His mother is also dressed in her Sunday best and looks enchanting. His father doesn't hide his admiration and plants a hearty kiss on his pretty wife's cheek. All in all, this August morning in 1938 is not like a normal day. In a few hours' time it's the start of the Brünig alpine wrestling contest, and father Thöni is the referee. He looks down affectionately at the boy sitting next to him, the youngest of his three sons, and murmurs "...a future wrestling champion", then picks up the reins and with a "giddy up" the horses set off at a brisk trot.

Alpine wrestling has been a family tradition for generations, of that you can be sure. This passion for the Swiss national sport has deep roots, and they are nurtured with pride. For Beat, aggressive competition has been a way of life since his earliest childhood.

### **Blessed with talent**

Discreetly but attentively, his father watches his son's first wrestling matches and is soon convinced: "Beat is a natural born wrestler." Life in Gadmental is rugged and down to earth, and shapes the growing boy's body and character in exactly the same way. There's no fancy training and no special diet for champion sportsmen. His parents have a farm; run a haulage business and a grocery and general store, which saves the residents of Wyler the trip down to Innertkirchen. At home Beat has to lend a hand with everything, both on the farm and with the heavy wood transports by tractor and trailer. He only gets the chance to wear his wrestling pants in his free time. But his talent is obvious and he is soon famous all over the valley. At 12 years old he makes it to the last round of a junior wrestling competition. He loses the round, but not his fighting spirit. The youth with fledgling talent grows into a strong young man with broad shoulders, powerful hands, striking, handsome features and a good-natured, winning smile. A face that which is once seen, is never forgotten. It's not long before this amiable son of the soil becomes one of the "tough guys" and has no opponents left to fear. Garlands, bells and trophies adorn the parlour. He is obviously on the brink of a great wrestling career.

### **From one moment to the next...**

On August 7, 1960, Beat Thöni reaches the last round of the traditional Brünig wrestling contest. The weather is not ideal. A violent storm has brought much cooler temperatures, and the sawdust is sticky and compacted. Although he started well, Beat doesn't feel at his best. He shakes his limbs as though testing their flexibility. Today he is determined to win. His opponent is none other than several times wrestling champion Karl Meli. The audience is in a fever of excitement. You can almost feel the tension. Both men are panting from the straining. Neither is giving

way to the other, they are equally matched in muscle power, agility, and can react in a split second where it counts. Who will make the first mistake? All of a sudden – after a hefty swing – Beat Thöni falls heavily, directly on his head. His spinal column cracks: a sound that he will never forget. His powerful body falls into the sawdust with a thud – he doesn't move. A whisper runs through the crowd and then suddenly fades away. An eerie silence carries the unspoken question: "...surely he's going to stand up...?" Beat Thöni doesn't stand up. He will never stand up again – this crushing realization, horrifies him. He is used to falling on his head, but this time it's different. His legs seem to be floating and his whole body feels as though it's been lifted off the ground. He can only feel his shoulders and his head, but this sense of lightness is deceptive. There is a terrible stabbing pain in his neck. He continues to lie there motionless. The sight is reminiscent of a fallen tree. The onlookers are seized with terror. The festive mood is shattered. Helpers try with all their might to help the fallen man to his feet. He doesn't look injured, it can't be that bad. "Leave me, I've had it" Hard words, chosen without pity. Slowly and with great difficulty he forces the words out. The whole-body paralysis has caused immediate breathing difficulties. His speech is laboured. Quietly but clearly he addresses his opponent: "It's not your fault, Kari, it was just a stupid accident." Even in the midst of this difficult situation, Beat Thöni realizes how important it is for his wrestling partner to hear this, as he stands there beside him, stunned and white as a sheet. The duty doctor also tries to lift up the heavy young man, driven by a desperate hope. And again the injured man tries to stop him with his last ounce of strength: "For heaven's sake, let me be..."

How many times have we heard this from the victims of accidents: paralysis passes through the spine and legs like a flash of lightning, the victims realise with this same lightening speed what happens. Things haven't changed. The great difference is that four decades ago we didn't realise the importance of expert rescue and first aid, and nobody had the least idea of the devastating consequences of inappropriate manipulation or of trying to stand the injured person up. Such attempts can turn what might have been an incomplete injury to the spinal cord into a complete or permanent paralysis.

## **Dark times**

Today Beat Thöni relates what happened to him after the accident with restraint and understanding. There isn't the trace of reproach, no resentment or bitterness. Until he got this far however, he went through the train of events in his mind over and over again: from the headlong fall into the sawdust until his first homecoming two years later, a quadriplegic with paralysis even in the arms and hands, and 30 kilos lighter. All circumstances and people involved played their part along this path of suffering, but there are no guilty parties. He has forgotten nothing, but forgiven everything: the journey in almost unbearable pain over the bumpy roads from the scene of the accident to the nearest hospital, laid on a wooden board and lying on the opened loading platform of a small transport van. Then the journey in the Land Rover to the university clinic. The anxious wait for a free X-ray table, as all the resources were taken up by "real emergencies" – for there wasn't a single visible scratch on him. The tortuous memory of the growing numbness in his hands and fingers, which he could still clearly feel and move immediately after the accident. Then total silence from his

whole body. The lonely, comfortless hours, days and nights, lying on his back, his head held in crutchfield tongs so that the broken upper cervical spine could knit together, dependent on others for his every need. The endless days, in which his hammering questions remained unanswered, because there were none; in which fear and hopelessness sank their claws into his mind and darkened the horizon. Meanwhile, large bed sores were gnawing away unseen at his buttocks and back.

### **Wrestlers show solidarity**

News of the popular wrestler's accident and its terrible consequences spread like wildfire through radio and newspapers all over the country. The older generation remembered Christian Reber from Schangnau, who in 1911 broke his neck at the national alpine wrestling festival in Zurich, with fatal consequences. Thankfully, no one knew of any other serious accidents in alpine wrestling, but the sad news that the victim was totally paralyzed stirred people into action. All of a sudden, his wrestling friends were galvanised into action. Beat Thöni was overwhelmed by a wave of help and support, which – as he frankly admits – saved his life. Strapping young men took it in turns on all-night duty by the hospital bed of their severely injured friend, giving him much needed moral support. They started a nationwide collection among the alpine wrestling community to collect money for his hospitalization costs, as the insurance payments were completely inadequate.

### **“The last supper”**

No one believed he would survive. One complication followed the other. Months had passed since the accident, but Beat Thöni hadn't been moved into a wheelchair once. The nursing care was attentive and exemplary, and no effort was spared. When asked what he would really like, he answered without hesitation: “Sauerkraut and speck...” The good-hearted nurse – born in the Emmental region – brought the wholesome food to his bedside the very next day and fed the delicious food to Beat with a spoon, ignoring all regulations. Her thoughts were clearly written on her face: “Let the poor boy enjoy it while he still can.” - With a typical twinkle in his eye, today the then doomed Beat Thöni still remembers his “condemned man's meal.” He tells the story with humour, and we both smile.

His spirits began to rise, not from one day to the next, but slowly and surely. And then one day, Beat Thöni no longer had any doubt: there were still things left for him to do on this earth, even from a wheelchair. Just different things from those he had imagined and wished for. How he was going to do them, he didn't at first know. And much of it remains his secret to this day, a secret that everyone duly respects.

In the early 1960s, Switzerland had no rehabilitation centres for patients with paraplegia. Beat was lucky to find good helpers in the Lory hospital and of course among his faithful circle of wrestling companions. This meant he was able to make several treatment and training visits to a clinic in Tobelbad near Graz, Austria. Here his pressure sores were treated surgically and finally healed up. He learned how to use a wheelchair, despite his severe paralysis. He also met some of his fellow

sufferers from Switzerland, "...the old guard of survival artists..." Leukerbad and the rehabilitation home in Basle were other places in which Beat Thöni found help and support for his preparation for life as a quadriplegic.

## **Support at home**

Professional rehabilitation was still in its infancy and had no great status. The possibilities were also limited by his severe paralysis and the predominantly physical work he had done in his parents' business before the accident. So Beat Thöni took over all the administrative work in the family store in Wyler and after his father's death he ran the business with the help of his mother. He found the support he needed back at his roots and in his parents' house.

Born under the sign of Taurus the bull, Beat Thöni lives his life at the entrance to the small village of Wyler near the pass to Susten in the venerable, more than 400-year-old family home, to which some simple but essential adaptations have been made to accommodate the wheelchair. This is the house where his grandfather had lived and in which his own father grew up. For a time he was attracted to wheelchair sports, trying to fill a painful gap in his life, albeit temporarily. As a member of the Swiss delegation, Beat Thöni took part in both the Tel Aviv and Heidelberg Paralympic Games. He entered the weight-lifting, Indian club throwing, javelin throwing and table tennis disciplines in his disability class. But his enthusiasm didn't last long. For there's only one sport that really matters to him. He still gets great satisfaction and pleasure from visiting alpine wrestling festivals with his old friends from the guild.

## **Together through life**

It was perhaps therefore no accident that in the summer of 1970 he met a vivacious young woman from Leukerbad at the Bernese Highland alpine wrestling festival. From the moment he saw her, he couldn't tear his gaze away from the "lively girl." Happily and with undisguised pride the successful suitor tells of his determined campaign to win her hand. Trudi turned him down repeatedly – though not always convincingly – and part of the charm of this love story lies in the contrast between their two characters. A year later Beat led his Trudi – and she him – down the aisle. Spontaneous and pragmatic, uncomplicated, full of life and a great good-heartedness, she had all the skills needed for this partnership with all its ups and downs. On unforgettable holidays- which for Beat alone, would have been impossible-

the pair gathered strength for their often stressful everyday lives. Trudi has always been at her husband's side, be it in the shop or when running the Wyler campsite, and during their thirty-year marriage she has looked after him almost single-handedly for twenty four hours a day. And the amazing thing is that their relationship has never developed into a one-sided dependence. "I have a lot to thank my wife for." – Trudi gives her husband a warm hug, underlining the mutual happiness of their partnership.

Six years ago Beat had two serious illnesses in quick succession which left him critically ill. He had to be urgently admitted to the intensive care ward of the Swiss Paraplegic Centre in Nottwil. For a long time, he hovered between life and death. Beat and Trudi are extremely thankful for all the expert help they received at Nottwil, where they found human support in their time of need. "In the not too distant future there will no longer be any wheelchair users of my generation left who know and can assess from their own experience how much progress has been made in this country within such a relatively short time. Through the triad of the Swiss Paraplegics Foundation, the Swiss Paraplegic Centre in Nottwil and the Swiss Paraplegics Association, Dr. Guido A. Säch has turned the holistic rehabilitation of patients with paraplegia into reality in such a unique way that it is now being imitated all over the world. It is of indescribable value for those of us who need it. Which is why we must work together to ensure that his work continues."

Thoughtfully, he powers up his wheelchair and accompanies me to the ramp that leads from his front door out on to the road. He is a man of few but apposite words. You feel comfortable in his presence and it is with reluctance that you take your leave of this strong and patient man, at ease with himself. Rather like a huge tree that makes you feel safe and secure, because it has weathered all storms and remains standing.

Beat Thöni is rooted in his ancient faith, in his belief in a divine plan, in which each of us has our place and our mission – and all with one goal and therefore one purpose.

Silvia Buscher, Paraplegie, No. 99, Paramedia

***Beat Thöni died on 18. October 2005. Because his life portrays an excellent example of the development of medical care to holistic rehabilitation of paralyzed patients, we have decided to continue to make his life story available to our readers.***