



Spinning Head: Life after my concussion

by Caroline Charpentier

On October 11, 2012, at the age of 28, my life turned upside down. I was with my friend Julie when, all of a sudden, I felt like I was going to vomit. As I was getting up, I passed out, falling and hitting the back of my head hard on the concrete. I was confused. I couldn't understand. I had no idea what could have caused this "attack." On top of that, a month earlier, I had sustained a concussion while playing volleyball, which meant two hits to the head in a short time. What followed was a tough battle that I am still fighting, having been diagnosed with severe post-concussion syndrome and autonomic nervous system dysfunction.

From the ages of 6 to 16, I was a figure skater. I had already competed in the Jeux du Québec (Québec games) three times. In practicing my triple jumps, which had to be quite high, I fell many times before I mastered the technique. Every part of my body absorbed shocks, even my chin! I remember, at the end of my career, being hospitalized for headaches, nausea, dizziness and sensitivity to sound, light, etc. The doctors could not find anything wrong with me. Concussions were not a well-known topic at the time. Also, most are not detected in scans or MRIs.

From 20 to 28, I inexplicably lost consciousness a number of times, accompanied by convulsions and vomiting. I was told that when someone accumulates concussions during childhood and adolescence, they can experience these types of inexplicable, unpredictable losses of consciousness as an adult.

My life can be divided in two: pre-October 2012 and post-October 2012. Before, I was very active! I held several jobs, did a lot of sports and had an active social life. Now, I'm a completely different person.

My symptoms vary in intensity throughout the day. They have diminished since the incident, but I still experience them on occasion. I have a significant lack of energy and therefore tire easily. I constantly have headaches and nausea. I frequently gag, when before I was a foodie! I have inexplicable heart palpitations and shortness of breath. These symptoms have caused me to lose a great deal of weight. I have problems sleeping and am woken up by headaches, dizziness, nausea, heart palpitations, etc. I do not suffer from anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, but unfortunately, some people also have to deal with these as well. I have loss of balance and vertigo. I am sensitive to light and sound. I have attention and concentration problems. My short and long-term memory is faulty. So I take notes and more notes! It's hard to get organized and plan the things I need to do. Sometimes, my brain seems to get scrambled. I will hear what someone tells me, but it takes a moment to register and understand the message. My brain has a tendency to fixate on a word or some other thing during a conversation and I lose track of what is being said. Or I will want to say a word and be unable to, even though I know the word in my head. But one big thing that hasn't changed since October 2012 is that I am surrounded by incredibly wonderful people who support me! That is priceless!

If I could go back, I wouldn't change my figure skating career because it played a key role in shaping my personality. It taught me to persevere in reaching my goals and to get back up after a fall, even if it was 20 times in a row. Now, it helps me be the fighter I am today and to continue believing that life is beautiful, despite the negative aspects. I did not share my story to scare people away from the sport. On the contrary! My ultimate goal is to ensure that the sport is practiced more safely and that those involved are more aware of the symptoms of a concussion. It is important to remember that someone could have a concussion even if they did not hit their head, lose consciousness or bleed. Be vigilant! If an athlete is complaining of headaches, nausea and dizziness, take them seriously. There's no need to panic. Just be aware.