

PARALYMPIC RIDER

# DR. ANGELIKA TRABERT

"IT'S ABILITY NOT DISABILITY THAT COUNTS!"

By HT Staff

"MY NAME IS ANGELIKA TRABERT (BUT MOST PEOPLE CALL ME GELI). I WAS BORN IN 1967 IN GERMANY. WHEN I WAS 6 YEARS OLD I SAT ON A PONY FOR THE FIRST TIME AND SO BEGAN MY LOVE FOR HORSES. PROMPTED BY MY INTEREST, MY PARENTS SEARCHED FOR WAYS TO ENABLE ME TO RIDE. I STARTED WITH HIPPO THERAPY (PHYSIOTHERAPY ON A HORSE) AND WAS INTRODUCED TO THE 'RIDING FOR THE DISABLED IN GERMANY'. IN 1985, ON MY FIRST VISIT TO THE USA, I STAYED WITH THE PRICE FAMILY FOR 5 WEEKS. WITH THEIR DAUGHTER, MICHELLE WHO HAD LOST HER LEG DUE TO BONE CANCER AT THE AGE OF 8, I RODE FOR THE FIRST TIME WITHOUT MY ARTIFICIAL LEGS. MICHELLE OFFERED ME A RIDE ON HER SENSITIVE ARABIAN HORSE 'PRINCE', BUT ASKED ME TO DO THAT WITHOUT MY ARTIFICIAL LEGS, BECAUSE SHE WAS NOT TOO SURE HOW HE WOULD REACT TO BOUNCING LEGS ON HIS BELLY. THAT WAS A NEW EXPERIENCE - FOR THE FIRST TIME IT WAS POSSIBLE TO RIDE WITHOUT PAIN AND TO LEARN ABOUT SITTING ON A HORSE CORRECTLY. BACK HOME, I CONTINUED TO RIDE IN A WESTERN SADDLE. IT GAVE ME MORE SUPPORT AND ENABLED ME TO STAY ON THE HORSE WITHOUT MY ARTIFICIAL LEGS."









*"In 1989 I was given my first special dressage saddle with the help of Mr. v. Dietze (who developed most of the compensating aids in Germany). Then I started to ride dressage, managed to become a trainer C for able-bodies, continued with my studies and became a trainer for the disabled. I bought my first horse in 1992 - 'Ghazim', a Trakehner gelding; together we lived through many ups and downs.*

*In 2001 I qualified as a trainer 'A' in Dillenburg with Ghazim. I also took the first step towards becoming an equestrian judge. Throughout that time I was also competing. I started to ride at a serious international level in 1991.*

*1996 in Atlanta I was elected "Athletes' Representative" for the International Paralympic Equestrian Committee (IPEC), I was re-elected in Sydney 2000 and again in 2004 and 2006. I started the IPEC internet page for athletes which then became the official IPEC page International. Since 1996, I have been instructing disabled children with horseback riding and showing them the opportunities and possibilities which arise from working with a horse as a partner. For most of them it is a new experience - to decide on their own what to do, where to go, and how to have such a big and powerful animal accept their decision and execute it! I was "on the road" for over 10 years with my Trakehner gelding who unfortunately, in 2004 injured his*

*right hind-leg which sadly prevented us from competing together, and so I had to retire him. He now helps a 13 year old getting started in dressage and I still use him to fit compensating aids for other riders with a disability!"*

#### **What can you tell us about your disability?**

I was born without legs and I have three fingers on my right hand, missing also the middle joints. The reason for the disability was never discovered, but it would not have made any difference to me anyway!

#### **Do you ride for the disabled team or the able-bodied, or both?**

Since 1991 I have ridden internationally for the German Para-Equestrian Team. So I've had the great opportunity to go to 3 European Championships, 4 World Championships and 4 Paralympics. All together I've won 13 silver and 2 gold medals. Our latest success was the European Championships in Norway, where I won silver in the individual, silver with the team and gold in the Freestyle test with my 9 year old mare Londria. I am very proud, since this was the first individual gold medal in my career so far. Besides riding internationally for the Para-Equestrian Team I also compete successfully at able-bodied competitions nationally up to 'M-dressage', which includes half passes and flying changes. In the last competition I entered this year, I rode the first 'S-dressage' including pirouettes, showing that there are no limits.

#### **As a disabled rider, how do you familiarise yourself with horses?**

When I start to ride a horse that has never been ridden by a disabled rider before, it is sometimes very obvious that the horse T-H-I-N-K-S! BUT horses are the best compensating aids we have. They usually do not care how the aids are being given to them, as long as they understand what the rider wants. They accept us the way we are. Sometimes I think it would be great if humans could act the same way and not question everything first. So horses do adapt quite easily and try to please the rider, when being asked gently and with understanding. The only problem which has appeared sometimes is that horses can feel insecure when I start to ride them without legs. Therefore I do need horses with a strong character, who are intelligent and willing to learn. And of course we both need just a little more time, patience and understanding.

#### **What can you tell us about your achievements, and what drives you to success?**

Looking back I do realise that I have achieved a lot in my life. Most of the credit I give to horses, because they taught me very early to be patient and to continue to practice without giving up that easily. I am not at the top level, I will probably never be able to reach that level, but the horse has made things possible for me that I never would have thought possible. This is what makes horse riding so special. It is interesting, never boring or finished. You can continue to learn and improve, even as you get older. Unlike many other physical sports, you can continue and become better as you gain more knowledge and experience of your horse and yourself! Just look at the age of some of those able-bodied Olympic riders. Besides the thrill of the event, competitions have brought me to a lot of different places around the world and introduced many different people to me, including some who have become good friends. I feel very honoured to have had such opportunities which a lot of able-bodied individuals will never experience.

▼ Angelika & Walmorel at an international event in Mannheim, Germany





In addition, the horse has also given me a chance to explore mountains, rivers and beaches – to go places I could never have been able to reach with my artificial legs or a wheelchair.

### **Do you ride as an individual or as a team member, or both?**

As a team member - both with my horse and with the German Team. As a partner, the horse taught me what I needed to know to be successful - and sometimes I think it is a benefit to not have any legs because I am not able to force the horse to do certain things, I always have to work with it as my partner. And because we have become good partners the horse has enabled me to be a proud member of the medal winning German Para-Equestrian team.

### **What are your future aspirations & what do you wish to achieve?**

I would like to participate at the 2010 World Equestrian Games riding for the German Para-Equestrian Team. Para-Equestrian, the 8th discipline of the FEI, will for the first time be part of the event. Primarily as riders who lack something in our bodies, we belong to the rest of the riding world and it is therefore correct that finally, Para is included with the other equestrian disciplines. But I have mixed emotions about this upcoming event since the costs will be outrageous. I am afraid that many Para-Equestrians from different nations will not compete because some of them cannot afford the costs, or because some nations will send able-bodied riders in preference to a Para-Equestrian. As the Athletes' representative I will see what I can do, as I feel the Games will only be successful if we have a broad representation of good riders to compete against. Will they be World Equestrian Games if half of the world cannot come?

### **Besides Angelika as a rider, what can you tell us about Angelika being an everyday person?**

Well I am a normal person and a rider! I enjoy my independence and am very thankful for it. I earn my money by being an Anaesthesiologist. Sometimes it is tough to coordinate and organise my work and my sport, but it is also a challenge and I would not want to miss



▲ A picture speaks larger than 1,000 words!

my work either. I also enjoy skiing and discovering new countries. I was in Guinea at the beginning of this year for 3 weeks. I worked there with my profession; we operated on 110 medical cases "out in the bush" in a small hospital 400km inland, which only operates those 3 weeks when a German medical team comes. It was a real challenge and a lot of people asked why I needed to go there. Well, that's very easy! Nobody else specialised in Anaesthesiology, was willing to go at that time! Furthermore I hoped it might also show the African people that a lot is possible if you are just willing to try despite a disability! When we arrived there I saw no persons with a disability – they were hidden away. But because of me in my wheelchair, their families gradually brought them out so we could see them. A beginning perhaps? I hope I am able to continue to take the challenges as they appear in my life and challenge others to do the same!

### **What can you tell us about your family?**

I am a single child, who is very lucky since my parents, grandparents and good friends helped me to get to where I am now. They gave me independence, openness, and a lot more.

### **Who has had the greatest impact on you?**

The greatest impact has been from my parents and Marc, my boyfriend. Marc taught me that there are no problems – just challenges which require good solutions (which he always had). He made life even more fun and was great at devising and building compensating aids for me (and for others). He also pushed me to achieve what was important to me, so I had to reset my "borders" anew several times. Sadly he died in plane crash in 2005 while he was fire fighting as a pilot in the South of France. But we had a great, if short, time together, which I would not have missed for the world.

### **If you have a message to give out to the world, what would that message be?**

"Carpe diem", which means use the day and my motto: It's Ability, not Disability, that counts! I believe we should live each day as it comes and seek out and focus on the ability. If you do, you will be surprised – there is always more ability than you expect. And it is SO great when you discover it in yourself, in others, in your horse. That's my motivation and I would like others to realise and enjoy it also! **HT**