

Wheelchair tennis star a force to be reckoned with



EYES ON BALL: South African Paralympic Lucas Sithole was fortunate to have the Duke of Kent come to watch his practice session at UJ tennis Club. PHOTO: NKULULEKO MARAIS

Nomaswazi Nkosi

AGAINST the odds triple amputee Lucas Sithole has risen above his circumstances and taken over South African wheelchair tennis.

Losing his legs and an arm in a freak goods train accident did not stop 26-year-old Sithole from realising his potential.

Sithole is South Africa's top wheelchair tennis player in the quad division and has represented South Africa.

Wheelchair tennis has taken Sithole all over the world. He was part of the South African wheelchair tennis team that participated in this year's London Paralympics.

"The Paralympics were very exciting for me. I learnt a lot and I hope to go back in 2016," Sithole said.

Though he lost to the number one wheelchair tennis

player in his division in his first match in London, Sithole's ranking jumped from ninth to sixth in the world following the Paralympics.

He uses one arm to throw the ball and hit it with the racket, while he manoeuvres the wheelchair with his hips.

Sithole lost his legs and arm in July 1998, when he was just 12 years old.

He said the goods train driver had asked him for help adjust the rail tracks to change direction.

He said once they had adjusted the tracks he tried to cross in front of the train and it ran him over. He spent a month in hospital.

"My family was very supportive and it did not take very long for me to come to terms with things after the accident," he said.

"I was introduced to wheelchair tennis in 2005

when I was in high school and by 2008 my coach thought I was ready to play professionally."

After the accident Sithole, of Newcastle, said he had to make some adjustments such as moving to a school for people with disabilities, using a wheelchair and learning to write with his left hand.

Sithole did not lose hope and finished matric. He began his diploma in sports management at the University of Johannesburg last year.

He said he put his second-year studies on hold to prepare for the Paralympics.

Among his other achievements are being named the Disabled Sportsman of the Year for Gauteng and South Africa in 2010, winning of 15 singles titles and beating the top four ranked players in the world. - nkosin@sowetan.co.za