
PASSION AND DETERMINATION OF THE DISABLED SUCCEEDING IN SPORTS

Rafał WILK, Janusz ZIELIŃSKI

Faculty of Physical Education, University of Rzeszow, Rzeszow, Poland

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Abstract:

Passion for sports and physical activity shaped Rafał Wilk's character and will power so that despite the sustained injury he was determined to pursue independence and continue doing sports. Cycling became a leading discipline, while skiing was a welcomed winter variation from tedious trainings on a simulator. Wilk's lifestyle, diet, time schedule are totally subjected to the competition calendar, what makes it possible to professionally prepare for the upcoming season. In his opinion, physical activity is the best method of rehabilitation for people with disabilities, as it allows them not only to win, but also to leave the house and get in touch with nature and other people. Every penny invested in a disable sportswoman or sportsman will pay off tenfold, and the health care system will economize on an expensive rehabilitation. Physical activity brings back self-confidence and self-esteem, and allows to enjoy life. Everyone can find a sports discipline which accounts for their disability, all you need is determination, motivation and passion. During the Games in London, Polish Paralympic national team proved not only to the disabled, but also to the society that persistence in pursuing a goal can make dreams come true and enable one to reap one's laurels. A sport is a sport, no matter who practises it. It brings out the same emotions in everybody – the desire to compete and win. It allows one to feel the sweet taste of victory and the bitter taste of defeat.

THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF SPORTS

Passion and determination enable every man to achieve success and realize oneself. Thanks to these features, we can develop our talents and predispositions. Sometimes, a simple hobby, pursued at our leisure, can become a way of life. By doing what we like, we improve ourselves and it gives us pleasure and satisfaction. Systematic implementation of a chosen plan of action shapes character and will power, elevating us to the summit of self-development. Usually, passion requires sacrifices, time and money, but due to determination we are able to achieve the highest pursued goals. When passion becomes a way of life, it also becomes the source of self-realization¹. Every one of us has many talents discovered by coincidence. Sometimes, we are reluctant to develop our gifts for fear of failure or opinion of others. It happens that parents belittle their children's early interests, quenching the children's

¹J. Gracz, T. Sankowski T: *Psychologia sportu*, AWF Poznań, 1995.

enthusiasm, or try to realize their own unfulfilled dreams. That is why, self-realization through one's passion determines one's happiness and, usually, makes success more probable².

According to the 2011 National Census³, carried out by the Central Statistical Office of Poland, Polish disabled amount to 12.2% of the population, what equals 4,700,000 people. However, this number is not accurate as almost 1,500,000 respondents used their right of voluntary response and refused to answer the question about disability. The given number includes both people who have a formal certificate of disability, and those who have health problems, but do not have a medical certificate confirming their condition. It is crucial for the disabled to have the possibility of leaving the house, going outdoors and opening to new challenges and acquaintances. Thanks to hobby and passion, the disabled consider themselves as full members of the society, useful and significant. It is helpful during rehabilitation as it boosts self-esteem and allows to enjoy life. The disabled often encounter many barriers – architectural, environmental, social, psychological – standing in their way to fulfilling dreams and developing their interests. But, the biggest barrier is the financial one, as a disabled person's income is usually low. Assistive equipment is very expensive, as technology and materials used are the state-of-the-art. For the disabled, sports may be something out of the ordinary and a perfect form of rehabilitation. Through practising sports, everyone can learn orderliness, persistence and patience⁴.

THE COURSE OF A SPORTS CAREER

From his early years, he practised sports. First, it was football. Then, when he was 12, he started exercising motorcycle speedway. At the age of 17, he obtained a competition licence. Since 1999, there are three sport disciplines in the life of Rafał Wilk (because this is his story): speedway, cycling and skiing. His first noteworthy success was a silver medal of Polish Pairs Speedway Junior Championship, won together with Piotr Winiarz in 1993. In 1994, a team: Rafał Wilk, Piotr Winiarz, Maciej Kuciapa, Rafał Trojanowski won a gold medal of Team Speedway Junior Polish Championship. Next year, they defended the title of junior champions and the name of the best junior speedway team in Poland and in the history of Rzeszów speedway. The success was paid for in minor or major injuries, that is broken upper limbs and collarbones. In 1996, after six seasons in Rzeszów, Wilk moved from Stal Rzeszów to JAG Łódź team. Then, after a mediocre season, he moved to Start Gniezno for a short while. He pondered on quitting speedway. But in 1999, in Rzeszów, two teams were established – a First league team and Second League one, the latter consisting mainly of juniors. Wilk decided to give that team and himself a chance. It was quite a successful season – successful enough to have an opportunity of competing within the first team. One year later, Wilk was part of the first team for good. But the results were not as promising, showing a downward trend, so in 2001, he moved to KKŻ Krosno where he was the leader. The next 2002-2004 season meant coming back to his home team, and in 2005 he went back to Krosno where once again he was reborn. At the end of the season, he became the new team leader and won a silver medal of Hungarian Individual Championships. The beginning of the 2006 speedway season was very good – Wilk won a quarter of the team points. Alas, on 3 May 2006, during the cup in Krosno, he sustained a spine injury which made it impossible to pursue his speedway career⁵.

² A. Łuszczynska: *Psychologia sportu i aktywności fizycznej. Zagadnienia kliniczne*, wyd. PWN, 2011.

³ dane Głównego Urzędu Statystycznego.

⁴ K. Milanowska: *Sport i aktywność ruchowa jako istotny czynnik w rehabilitacji osób niepełnosprawnych* [w:] J. Ślężyński (red.): *Sport w rehabilitacji niepełnosprawnych*, Studio Wyd. Agata, 1999.

⁵ K. Kubala, R. Wilk: *Złoty medalista paraolimpijski, pracownikiem Wydziału Wychowania Fizycznego*, „Gazeta uniwersytecka pracowników i studentów Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego”, nr 5, 2012.

SELF-REALIZATION THROUGH CYCLING, SKIING AND SPEEDWAY

In 1998, Wilk bought his first mountain bike and slowly developed a new hobby what resulted in Polish Amateur Championship in mountain biking. At first, he competed at short distances, but then he decided to try marathon mountain bike races and took part in such events in Poland and Europe. Notching up higher and higher places in successive editions of marathon bike races, both in Poland and Europe, he obtained first position in the final standings of his age group. As a University of Rzeszów student and academic sports club (KU AZS UR) representative, he came first in the team standings in 2004. Bike was his leisure activity and a way of life, too. He, then, met many people of similar interests. Wilk practised mountain biking and took part in races until the day of injury on a speedway track⁶.

In 1999, he completed a ski instructor course ran by Polish Ski Federation. In 2002, he gave his name to a resilient ski academy XTR Sport in Rzeszów. There, he focused on training children who won numerous prizes in regional ski league. As a coach, he still improved his sports skills during countless courses, including carving trainings. Due to his high qualifications as a ski instructor, Wilk was appointed a member of the carving committee of Ski Instructors and Trainers Association⁷.

On 3 May 2006, during a collision on a speedway track, Wilk suffered a lumbar spine fracture and other internal injuries. While in hospital, he was told by the doctors that he would not walk again and that it would be impossible for him to return to professional sport. After three weeks Wilk was released from hospital and began long and tedious rehabilitation. He fought his way back to “normal” functioning and independence. His determination and desire to return to sports resulted in six-hour-long hospital rehabilitating sessions and two hours of individual exercise at home every day. Week by week, Wilk became more and more independent and made little but visible progress⁸. After three months, he was independent enough to sit and move around on a quad bike, what gave him enormous satisfaction. After six months, he was psychically and physically strong enough to ski again, this time sitting – on a monoski. He started organizing ski trips and, by the way, learned much about the disabled sports. On a specially designed ski-bob, Wilk learned how to sit-ski in the Alps, assisted by an instructor for the disabled. After a while, he practised on his own with a little help of a friend. Soon, he was sufficiently capable of controlling the bob, so for the remaining days of stay, he enjoyed moving around ski runs and lifts independently. His passion for skiing was reborn and, thanks to his determination and motivation, he could experience the fun of winter sports once more. He discovered that having a proper equipment, designed to fit the special needs of a disabled person, made everything possible. He skied regularly with his children, what was an additional motivating factor for further rehabilitation and self-development. Using a monoski, Wilk returned to training children and youth in skiing. In 2007, he returned to speedway, too, becoming a coach of Marma Rzeszów team. Under his supervision, Rzeszów team came fourth in Team Speedway Polish Championship, and the junior team came third. In 2009, he took a job as a speedway coach in Lublin⁹.

THE BEGINNING OF A HANDBIKE ADVENTURE

In 2009, Wilk experienced his first ride on a borrowed handbike. Two weeks of handcycling later, his passion was back. Following a hanbike colleague’s advice, Wilk decided to buy a professional handcycle. He bought it, thanks to a sponsor, in 2010. The bike

⁶ M. Szczudło, J. Zieliński: *Działalność sekcji kolarskiej Klubu Uczelnianego Akademickiego Związku Sportowego Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego* [w:] K. Warchoł (red.): *Wychowanie fizyczne w szkole w okresie reformy programowej systemu edukacji*, Prace naukowo-dydaktyczne, PWSZ Krosno, zeszyt 54, 2011.

⁷ Oficjalna strona internetowa XTR Sport: www.xtrsport.nazwa.pl.

⁸Z relacji ustnej R. Wilka udzielonej J. Zielińskiemu.

⁹ B. Skrzyński: *Żuźłowcy bez barier: Rafał Wilk*, „Sportowe Fakty.pl”, 2010.

arrived at Wilk's house while he was undergoing a spinal fusion revision surgery in Lublin hospital. When he came back home, he could not say no to a ride on a new bike. After sometime, he started regular trainings, despite an unfinished convalescence. But Wilk's passion for cycling was stronger than pain, and both determination and motivation shaped him up. Three months later, after practising with his new equipment, Wilk took part in his first competition for people with disabilities. It was a four-stage 100km race during which he met Polish and world leaders of handcycling. He was fifth in the final standings – an answer to the question whether he was ready to compete on a professional level. He took part in four more marathons that season, everywhere coming fifth. Since December 2010, he have co-operated with coach Jakub Pieniżek. Wilk was so determined that he took his handbike even on ski trips and practised on a simulator. After winter preparations, it was time to compete in the new season of 2011. In his first race, a half-marathon in Poznań, he came third, after wheeling to the finish line together with the then world champion. Next races took place abroad where Wilk was taught some tactic lessons. When the season began, Wilk decided to quit his regular job, as he knew that it would be difficult to reconcile it with the trainings and competition calendar. In the 2011 season, he joined the world lead, winning the Europe Cup as well as marathons in Poland and all over the world. Main season events were: World Championships in Roskilde, Denmark, where he came sixth in individual time trial and seventh in mass-start race. He also won Polish Championship in individual time trial. The jewel in the season's crown was the biggest marathon in the world held in New York, where Wilk came second. UCI (Union Cycliste Internationale) points allowed Wilk to think of participating in London 2012 Summer Paralympics. In December 2011, together with his coach, he started getting ready for the Olympic season. After ten weeks, they went to Lanzarote where a training camp of Paralympic national team was supposed to take place. Unfortunately, Polish Paralympic Committee withdrew from financing the camp and sportsmen have to pay for themselves. Apart from high costs, Wilk was pleased that he could practise in such favourable conditions, away from Polish winter. The stay on the Canary Islands bore fruit – later on Wilk achieved remarkable results and before that he took part in the first race of the season, on the Islands. He came second, losing only to a world champion Joel Jeannot from France. After the training camp in Spain, he went home for just three days and rushed to a ten-day training camp in Rimini, Italy together with the able-bodied cyclists. There, he took part in Maraton di Roma and came third. When he came back, he officially started competing in Europe and took part in a race in Rosneau, France. There, after a joint escape, he lost to Jeannot, who was in great shape, once again. In the next races, a half marathon in Poznań and marathon in Kraków, Wilk came first, gaining a great advantage over rivals. Then, his participation in London Paralympic Games was uncertain as both Arkadiusz Skrzypiński (handbike) and Krzysztof Kosikowski (tandem) were front-runners. Wilk competed for the last available place on the national team with one of the tandems. The fact that he medalled in every race he took part in (both in the World and Europe Cup) convinced Polish Paralympic Committee members to grant Wilk with the Paralympic nomination¹⁰.

At the end of July, he participated in a training camp in Zieleniec, the highest-located town in Poland, famous for its mountain microclimate comparable to an Alpine climate. Immediately after the camp in Zieleniec, he went on the last pre-Olympic race in Lobbach, Germany, where he came first with an over 3-minute advantage¹¹. The last stage of the Paralympics preparations was planned for Szczecin, but Wilk and his coach decided to go on an individual mesocycle to Istebna, instead. After endurance tests, which showed the decrease of lactate and increase of force [W/kg] levels during the previous two months, gentlemen

¹⁰ R. Wilk: wypowiedź z filmu pt. *Paraolimpijczyk*.

¹¹ Oficjalna strona European Handcycling Federation: <http://www.ehf-ehc.eu/page2/page12/page12.php>.

focused on the intensity of practice. The training cycle ended two days before departure to the Paralympics, and the Paralympic nomination was handed to Wilk by Longin Komołowski, the president of Polish Paralympic Committee, a day before the flight. The official opening ceremony of the Paralympic Games was held on 29 September 2012 on the Olympic stadium in London¹². This beautiful and moving occasion was honoured by Queen Elisabeth II and the Royal Family. For Wilk, it was ten days to his first race; in the meantime, he commuted to practise on a specially prepared track. Two days before the race, the Olympic track was made accessible to all competitors, what made it possible to thoroughly examine its elevation profile. After the suits check, everything was ready for the first competition – individual time trial. The technical check of the equipment took place a few minutes before arriving at the start ramp. Rafał Wilk started as the penultimate competitor in the 16,4km race. After the first lap, his time was the best, and after the second, it was almost certain that he won a medal. When the last competitor, Joel Jeannot crossed the finish line, it was clear that Wilk came first with an over 50-second advantage. The victory ceremony took place on the Brands Hatch track. The Olympic champion was accompanied by the silver medalist Nigel Barley from Australia and bronze medalist Bernard Jeffre from Germany¹³.

A day-break in the competition allowed for supercompensation and biological regeneration. The second competition was a 64km mass-start race. It required a premeditated tactics which predicted an attempt to fly the rivals in the middle of the distance. On every climb, Vico Merklein was the pacemaker, and during the third lap his attack was successful enough to break the group, leaving three contenders for the win. Who takes what was decided during the fifth lap when Wilk attacked on the longest climb, escaping the rivals who could not keep up with his pace. Two laps remaining and Wilk's advantage over the second contender came to 12 seconds, and over the third - to over 30 seconds. On the final lap, the time gap amounted to over a minute, so only an equipment failure or a fortuitous event might have prevented Wilk from winning his second gold medal (overall, ninth gold for Poland) on London Paralympics. Vico Merklein won silver and Joel Jeannot won bronze medal. The achieved results of both Rafał Wilk and other Polish competitors brought them recognition and respect of Polish fans. Their medals also became an inspiration for the disabled encouraging them to do sports. Polish national team on London Paralympic Games, due to great passion and determination of sportswomen and sportsmen, took ninth place in final standings with 14 gold, 13 silver and 9 bronze medals. Their performance was a huge success, and their results were much better than those of the national Olympic team¹⁴.

¹² Z relacji ustnej R. Wilka udzielonej J. Zielińskiemu.

¹³ tamże.

¹⁴ Z relacji ustnej R. Wilka udzielonej J. Zielińskiemu.