

# Pushing the Limit, a Fencer Is Heading to the Paralympics, in a Wheelchair

By KAREEM FAHIM

First, she had to conquer the lampposts.

Before Andrea de Mello ran 20 marathons, and before she fenced for Brazil at the Paralympic Games in Atlanta; Sydney, Australia; and Athens, she stood at a lamppost next to Central Park and wondered whether she could walk to the next one.

They were only 50 yards apart. But Ms. de Mello, who was then 15 years old, had spent most of the previous five years in a wheelchair or a hospital bed after having a stroke during a trip to an amusement park in Brazil. She had very limited use of the right side of her body, and could stand and walk haltingly with a cane.

She walked to the next lamppost. She rested and reached another one, and then the next: six lampposts in all on that first trip. "She had probably not walked that far in many, many years," said Richard Traum, the founder of the Achilles Track Club, who was there for what would become the first training session in Ms. de Mello's athletic career.

"All of a sudden, she had a goal," Mr. Traum said. "She came back and did eight lampposts."

That was 23 years ago. Ms. de Mello, now 39, has been training ever since, and started fencing in 1993. This month, she will be in Beijing for her fourth Paralympics — her first as a member of the United States wheelchair

fencing team. (She is now an American citizen.) She has not yet won a medal, and is not a favorite to win one. But she is undeterred and thrilled to be competing as an American.

"This time is my time," she said during a recent training session at the Fencers Club, on West 25th Street. Her sister, Valeria de Mello, 45, watched and fretted as a coach, Simon Gershon, tried to get Andrea to relax.

He told her to smile, to focus. "Ready," he said. "Parry, riposte." In two quick movements, Ms. de Mello's sword landed on Mr. Gershon's chest.

Before she started fencing, Ms. de Mello had been running marathons for years — very, very slowly, she said. Wheelchair fencing was a new physical challenge and a way to keep healing. "Her life is a continuous recovery," Valeria de Mello said. In fencing, she added, "you have to focus. You have to have quick reflexes. It helps with cognition."

Andrea de Mello said: "A strong recovery. Inside and outside."

The sisters, who live together on the Upper East Side, talk over each other. Andrea has some difficulty speaking, and Valeria helps her, but the two would probably finish each other's sentences anyhow.

They had trouble finding a fencing instructor at first, until meeting Mr. Gershon, who coached Soviet fencing teams in



Andrea de Mello, 39, who had a stroke as a child, will compete in Beijing for the American team.

the 1980s. He had never taught a fencer in a wheelchair before, but he was steeped in the fencing theory that Ms. de Mello needed.

She had to learn to fence left-handed because she still had limited use of her right side. Unlike some of the paraplegics and leg

amputees she would compete against, Ms. de Mello could not rely on her other arm to anchor her to the wheelchair when she lunged. She had to use her left leg for balance.

Mr. Gershon is not her only coach. He teaches foil, the branch

of fencing where the fencer's torso is a target. Another coach, Jerzy Grzymalski, teaches épée, where a fencer's whole body is a target and the sword is heavier; in the wheelchair version, the fencer's body from the waist up is a target.

As they trained, Mr. Gershon asked Ms. de Mello to economize her movements. "If it costs \$1, don't pay \$20," he said. Nearby, members of a young able-bodied group fenced, their advances and retreats looking almost clumsy compared with Ms. de Mello's repeated, careful movements.

Mr. Gershon is not going to Beijing for the Paralympics, whose opening ceremony is on Saturday. The American team has its own fencing coach. Mr. Gershon reminded Ms. de Mello to rest and to drink fluids. "Without gas, the car not move," he said. "This is a Mercedes."

Ms. de Mello and her sister travel the world to fencing competitions. Poland is their favorite destination, and they always stay a few extra days to visit Krakow. For the most part, they have had to pay their own way: Andrea does not work, and Valeria works for Mr. Traum's organization, which encourages people with disabilities to participate in mainstream athletics.

Andrea de Mello almost did not qualify for Beijing. About three years ago, a cyclist struck her in Central Park, and she was forced to miss some qualifying tournaments. But she received enough points to qualify in January this year at a World Cup competition in Germany. Although she is focused on Beijing, she is hoping for a long fencing career.

"In my mind," she said, "I'm going to 2012."

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