

# Dreaming in Color

by Jane Cadieux and Fay Rogers



Photo credit: Klaus Althuber

“I’m still just a nobody” he said, “but if my race results improve and more people start to follow my project, I am confident support will grow.” Thibault Trancart, blind Paralympian Alpine Ski hopeful, Winter Olympics 2018.

Thibault joined us at Geneva’s legendary Old Town café La Clémence at Bourg-de-Four early one Saturday morning last February. We sat in the small slightly elevated alcove area in the back of this popular landmark, cozily tucked into an edifice dating back to the 1600s. Within seconds of making introductions, we fell into a mind-absorbing exchange about Thibault’s life so far. We were the only customers for about 10 minutes so our interview just developed very naturally. As the regulars began strolling in for their morning lattés, coffees and croissants, ensconcing themselves before their morning news print or smartphones, few paid any attention to the good looking young lad speaking and answering questions in perfect English. No one saw his telescopic white walking cane propped by his chair, or watched him feel for his coffee cup and the saucer to replace it after each sip, or had any notion that Fiona, his loyal golden Labrador, was

snuggled comfortably at his feet under our bistro table, taking in every word.

Thibault’s story, Thibault’s project, Thibault’s dream—all together is something very special. Once you hear it, you realize that your own self, deep within, feels touched and warmly rewarded, not from the compassion he has aroused inside you, but because of the admiration and respect that attracts you to him.

Born in Geneva almost 26 years ago, the second of three children, Thibault suffered from cancer of the retina in his left eye at the age of 2. At 5, the cancer had spread to his right eye. After extensive research and more than 70 operations, a tumor developed on his optic nerve very close to the brain, obliging him to undergo a risky operation to remove

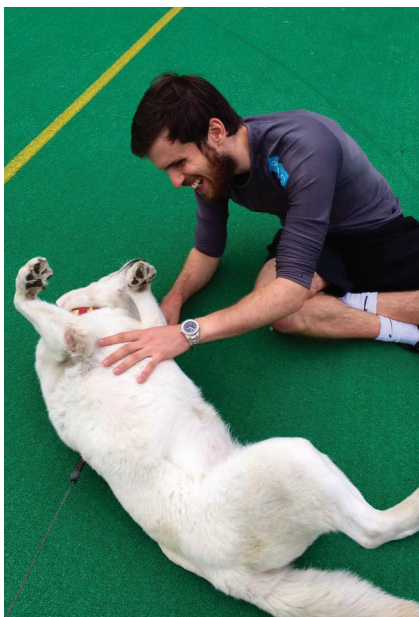




Graduation at McGill University. Photo credit: Owen Egan



Thibault with his family.



it. Though the tumor was successfully removed, Thibault lost even the remaining little sight he had and was declared totally blind on January 23, 2006 at the age of 14. He tells this story very pointedly, explaining that because he was not born blind, he still has vivid visual memories of his family and their home in the Old Town, their ski chalet in Chamonix, what people and things look like. “Do you dream in color?” he says is the most frequently asked question. He smilingly answers that he does indeed dream in color, except that he has some trouble visualizing purple. Another FAQ is about switching from the Geneva public school system to Ecolint (International School of Geneva). He admits that some people are often surprised to learn that a local native Swiss would attend the International School. But he is quick to explain that his parents enrolled him at the Nations Campus, which was quite new at the time, because it had a smaller student body with a high teacher-student ratio and was better equipped to deal with his special needs. Thibault spoke fondly of this period, his struggles to learn the language, adapt to an all-English curriculum and his special attachment to Mrs. Hughes, his French teacher. Four years later, fully bi-lingual and holding an IB, he, accompanied by his faithful Fiona, courageously enrolled at McGill University in Montreal. In June 2015, he was the first blind person to graduate from its Desautel’s Faculty of Management and Fiona was the first canine to walk across the stage wearing a cape and cap.

“So, what about this dream and your ambitious project to represent Switzerland at the Winter Paralympics 2018 in South Korea,” we ask? “Well,” he says, “I started skiing with my dad when I was about 4. He had trained to be my guide. Even with impaired vision, I grew up on the slopes and always loved the thrills and challenges of skiing. When I look back on my growing up, my best memories are of our family ski holidays and hanging out with my friends on and off the slopes. The idea of qualifying for the Swiss Paralympic alpine skiing competition team started more or less as a joke back in 2008, when I was 15. Elie, my childhood friend and regular skiing companion who was then 11 years old, teasingly predicted that one day he would be my guide and we would bring home a Swiss medal from the Winter Paralympics. About six years later in December 2014, Elie, my cousin Anoushka and my good friend

Claire, were skiing with me in Chamonix over Christmas university break and this half-serious dream of ours resurfaced. We hashed out the pros and cons, the possibilities, the many “ifs” and “whats,” and the more we toyed with the idea, the more motivated we became. As you see, this ambitious undertaking grew from being a crazy idea to a colorful dream and now it’s a viable and promising goal, requiring considerable effort, patience, optimism and, of course, money,” he adds with a half-grin.

Qualifying for the Swiss ski team would be no easy feat for anyone so one can only imagine how difficult it must be for a blind or vision-impaired skier. In fact, it is probably unimaginable for most of us! Thibault carefully explained the strict entry requirements and regulations, the different categories and how the point system worked. He added “it’s like golf, the fewer the points or marks you receive, the higher you are ranked.” He admitted that his team attacked this project head-on not really knowing fully what they were getting into. They first modeled their project on “Humans of New York” and called it “Humans of Chamonix” and put it on Facebook. Their motivation generated their energy. They set up a business plan, created a budget, sought out sponsors and quickly realized that while they



had considerable followers, they had a long way to go and a lot of work to do.

After graduating from McGill in June 2015, Thibault lunged into a full training program with SportQuest as a major sponsor, and with Anoushka as his ski guide. Elie and a few other friends organized the project's first fundraiser in December 2015 at Geneva's Arcadem. They were on their way! The team's efforts paid off and they won the silver at the Swiss Championships in March 2016. Anoushka went back to her studies and Claire Terraillon took over as his guide until last October. The Swiss Paralympic Ski Team invited him to join in their trainings on the Kaunertal glacier in Austria in early November 2016 which proved to be an invaluable experience. A second fundraising event was organized in Geneva at the end of November at SportQuest, where ISTA, the International Snow Training Academy, auctioned eight vouchers for an avalanche rescue training and ski safety awareness course. The winning bidders spent a marvelous unforgettable day



Thibault with Claire Terraillon. Photo: Facebook

with Thibault and the ISTA trainers in Chamonix in January participating in this course.

In addition, with the help of family, friends and two foundations, he is making long strides towards meeting the project's budget. As of this interview, the project needed approximately CHF 45,000 more to cover the budget until May, when the Swiss team selection would be made. He probably won't know until February 2018 if he will qualify to represent Switzerland at the Paralympics in South Korea. "I would have more support, I think, if I were better known, but I am still just a nobody; if my race results improve and more people start to follow my project, I am confident support will grow," he added with his constant positive attitude. To this end, and as a self-marketing effort, Thibault has started giving motivational and team-building presentations to schools and companies hoping to increase people's awareness of the abilities and potential of the blind and vision impaired. It is so admirable to witness his positive enthusiasm—it really is contagious.

Manuelle Pauli, Thibault's long-time coach, took over as his guide last November. Her professional experience and quali-

fications as a Swiss ski guide have added another dimension to the project. After an unfortunate beginning to the season and two eliminations, they restructured their technical training objectives, particularly how they would attack each qualifying race. Thibault has now moved up in his rankings. At the time of this interview, he had five qualifying races left and finally the Swiss Championships in early April. "What are your chances of qualifying?" we asked. "Some say I have a 20% chance, others say more. It all depends on how I do between now and the Swiss Championships at the beginning of April in Veysonnaz. After that there will be a big meeting in May to select the Swiss team. I should know better than what my chances are of being selected. One thing is certain, while there have already been Swiss vision-impaired skiers, if I do qualify, I will be the first fully blind skier to ski for Switzerland, and I will be very proud of that."

It was lunchtime and our three-hour interview had come



Thibault in Veysonnaz, April 2017. Photo: Facebook

to a close. The café was now full with people waiting for a place. Only as we were leaving, when we returned Fiona's water bowl and she became anxious for her walk, did the sudden tapping of the walking stick and the jingling sound of the dog's chain bring the customers' attention to the fact that a young, good-looking athletic blind man was being led out of the café by his beautiful service dog. What an unforgettable experience and honor this was for us. You can follow Thibault, share and support his project online at [hiip://thibaulttrancart.ch](http://thibaulttrancart.ch) or on Facebook and Twitter. ♦

**News just in:** Just before going to print with this issue, Thibault called in to let us know that he came in 1st place in the Giant Slalom in the Swiss Ski Championship competition, and 3rd in the International Category which took place in Veysonnaz on April 1st. After finally holding a place on the podium, he proudly acknowledged that things are "looking up!"

