

BRITNEY STRUMPHER

GIVING A VOICE

TEENAGE TRIATHLON ACE HAS TURNED TOUGH TIMES INTO MOTIVATING TIMES. BY WILHELM DE SWARDT

Most people probably don't give much thought to the phrase 'all men are created equal'. But to anyone with a disability it's a significant subject.

So, if there's one thing that TuksSport High School's Britney Strumpher would like to change, it would be the way 'normal' people tend to interact with anyone with a disability.

'I am Britney. Not Britney, "that girl" who wears hearing aids and has a speech impediment due to being born with a cleft palate and suffering from vertebral stenosis,' says Strumpher, who earlier this year finished second in the U19 race at the South African Triathlon Championships in Bloemfontein.

Eighteen-year-old Strumpher views her disabilities not as a drawback but as extra motivation to fulfil her dream: to represent South Africa as a triathlete at the Olympic Games, with the 2024 edition a target.

'Physical appearance should never influence the way you treat anybody. When people don't respect who you are, it brings you down as a person,' she says.

'I'm like anyone else, although I'm disabled. I've set myself a goal to use my disabilities to try and motivate people who have some physical defect. There's never any reason to limit yourself. That's why I chose to compete against able-bodied athletes.'

There's a good reason Strumpher has such strong opinions. When she was at primary school, she was often bullied and ridiculed about the fact she wore hearing aids, as well as the way she spoke. She's put that behind her, believing it helped her to become a better and stronger person.

Strumpher was not first and foremost a triathlete; initially she was a more-than-handy swimmer and in 2016 missed out on qualifying for the 50m breaststroke event at the Rio Paralympics by a few hundredths of a second.

Then a knee injury changed everything. 'I lost my passion for swimming and during the time I was out of the pool, my rivals got a lot faster and I wasn't able to catch up.

'I took up triathlon last year after watching a friend compete. After my first race, I was hooked as I loved the adrenaline rush that goes with competing. Switching sports was the best decision I ever made. I'm in a better place in my personal life – more positive and motivated.'

The Grade 12 student is realistic about what awaits her if she wants to realise her dream of competing at the Olympics. 'At the moment I'm too slow. I'll need to improve by at least seven to 10 minutes over the course of the 1.5km swim, 40km cycle and 10km run. But the only way to do so is to become physically stronger. I also need to improve my technique in the disciplines.

'That's the reason I joined a cycling club. In the past I used to cycle, at most 60km, in a long ride. Now every weekend I do anything from 70 to 100km and I can already feel my strength and endurance starting to improve.'

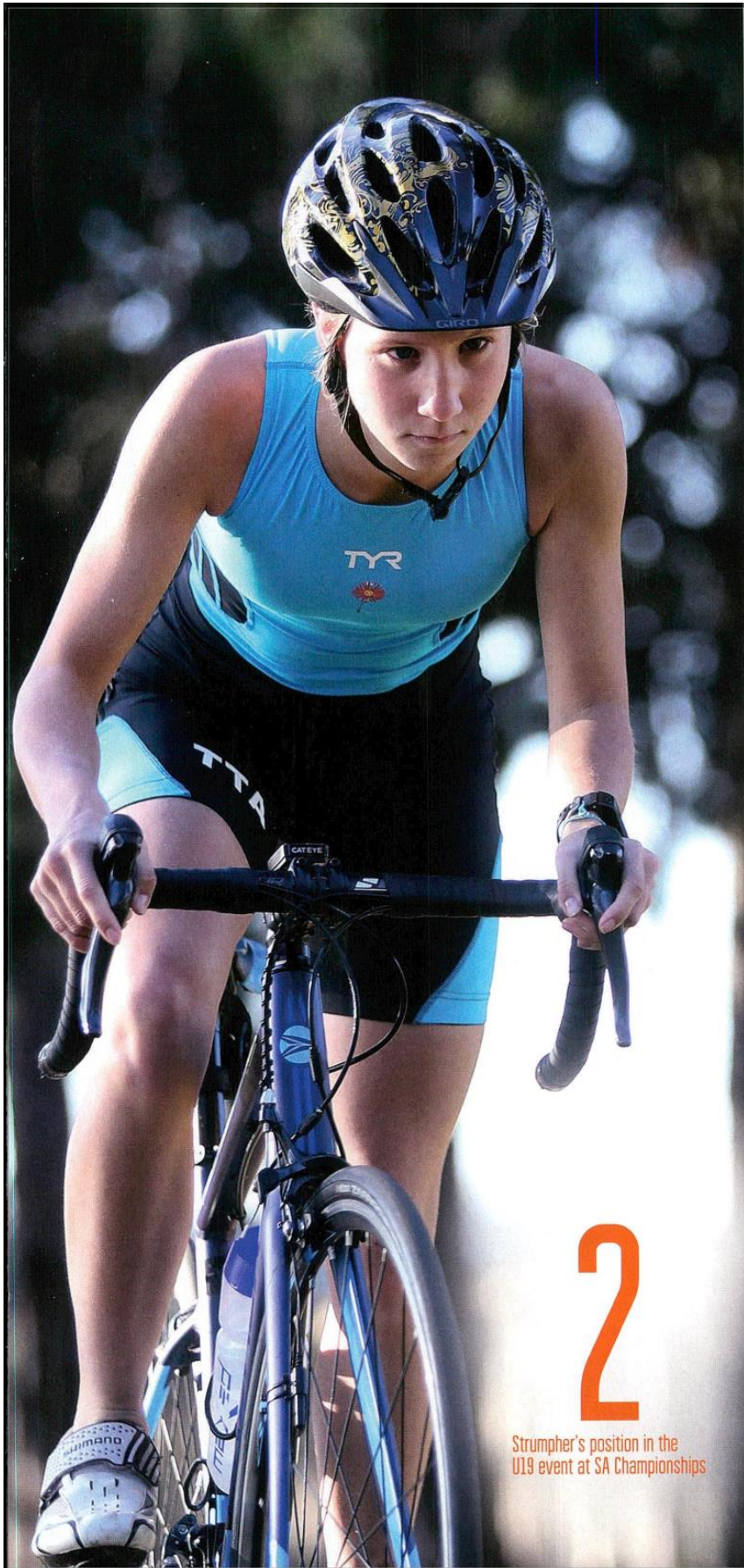
Strumpher competes without hearing aids and does so for two reasons. She



/// DID YOU KNOW? ///

In the medical field, stenosis means the abnormal narrowing of a body channel. When combined with the word spinal, it defines a narrowing of the bone channel occupied by the spinal nerves or the spinal cord.

REG CALDECOTT



Strumpher's position in the U19 event at SA Championships

doesn't want water to get into her ears and she wants to save time during the transition. Having to take the putty out her ears after the swim and putting in the aids easily prolongs her transition by about 20 seconds. And that could mean she misses the vital break in the cycle leg.

'Cycling and running without a hearing aid does put me at a slight disadvantage as my balance is not quite what it should be, but I can handle it.'

Strumpher credits her coach Kate Roberts, a three-time Olympian, with helping her transform from being average to becoming competitive.

'There's never any reason to limit yourself. That's why I chose to compete against able-bodied athletes'

'What I appreciate about Kate is that she admits to having made mistakes when she competed. One of her goals as a coach is to make make sure we don't repeat them. The important thing is to never give up. Kate also always emphasises the importance of the "Five-P" mantra: proper planning prevents poor performance.'

Strumpher is due to compete at the SA Duathlon Championships being held at the Midmar Dam in KwaZulu-Natal. Last year she finished third in her category, but she's quietly confident of putting in a better performance this time around.

After finishing matric, she wants to study psychology and work as a sports psychologist as she truly loves to motivate and encourage people, especially athletes, to never give up.

She also has dreams of developing a hearing aid which is compatible with wireless technology so it will be easier to listen to the music of her choice. And, of course, there's that dream of having 'normal' and 'disabled' people singing from the same hymn sheet! ■

