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JOSEPH NEWCOMB PHOTO

# Béatrice de Lavalette

# STANDING TALL

After a terrorist bombing nearly killed her, the 19-year-old rider sets her sights on the 2020 Paralympics and beyond.

By **Kelly Sanchez**

**Béatrice de Lavalette props her foot atop a tack trunk and pulls a white-handled Allen wrench from a small bag. Pulling down her sock and lifting the skin-toned suction liner, she exposes several small set screws, inserts the wrench, and makes a few turns.** Her custom riding boots have yet to arrive, so she's riding in sneaker-clad prosthetic feet, adjusting the angle to fit her stirrups.

It's all part of the 19-year-old's "new normal" since she nearly lost her life in a 2016 terrorist attack in Belgium that killed 32 people and injured hundreds more. Unable to save her badly injured legs, doctors amputated both just below the knee.

These days, she gets around mostly by wheelchair and needs someone to lift her up on her horse, but de Lavalette refuses to let "the accident," as she calls it, plunge her into bitterness or fear. She's charting her own path and using her experiences to fuel her dream of competing on the U.S. para-dressage team at the 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo.

## A FATEFUL MORNING

On March 22, 2016, de Lavalette was in the crowded departures hall at Brussels' Zaventem International Airport, traveling alone to Florida, where her family was relocating after living in Europe for more than two decades. Pushing her hot pink L.L. Bean bag with her foot, she inched through the Delta check-in line and chatted with her brother via FaceTime.

She'd just hung up when a suicide bomber detonated a bomb four feet from where she stood. The blast engulfed her in a fireball and blew her off her feet. It was 7:58 a.m. Nine seconds later, a second device exploded in another part of the terminal.

Of the moment of impact, de Lavalette says, "I had my headphones on and was looking at my phone, and then ... black."

Regaining consciousness, she became aware that she was on her back, unable to speak or hear. Around her it was chaos: Windows had shattered, ceilings had collapsed, and the terminal was filled with black smoke and debris.

"I think I knew what had happened, and I knew my right leg was bad, but that wasn't my main focus," she says. "You go into survival mode."

Fearing additional bombs, emergency responders had been unable to reach victims for 45 minutes, and even then, recovery efforts were hindered by the discovery of a third—unexploded—device in the terminal. Once inside, they assessed the injured and assigned them colored tags: green, yellow or red, and black for the dead. Priority was given to victims deemed most likely to survive—green and yellow.

"I was red," de Lavalette says.

A woman lay beside her, her hair on fire. Without thinking, de Lavalette reached over to tamp out the flames. She looks at her left hand. "I've got a scar to remind me of that," she says. "I'm very proud of it."

Seeing a firefighter, de Lavalette gestured to get his attention. He turned and sprayed her with water. "I guess my hair was on fire too," she says.

One of the last of the injured to be evacuated and the first to be airlifted to the nearby Queen Astrid Military Hospital, de Lavalette was burned and bleeding heavily, and her lower legs were seriously injured. As she drifted in and out of consciousness, she heard someone say, "Stay awake. Don't go to sleep."

Brussels was in the middle of the worst terrorist attack in Belgium's history when at 9:11 a.m., another bomb rocked a metro train as it pulled out of a busy downtown station.

In Florida, de Lavalette's parents, Elizabeth and Nicolas de Lavalette, were awakened by a pre-dawn phone call. It was Julie Dossin, Béa's riding coach in Brussels. "There's been an explosion at the airport," she told Elizabeth, "and Béa's not answering her phone."

## MAD FOR HORSES

Béa can't remember a time when she didn't love horses. Born in Paris to an American mother and a French-American father, she grew up outside the capital near Versailles, home to Louis XIV's opulent palace as well as one of the largest riding clubs in France. Elizabeth had ridden growing up in Connecticut at Ronnie Mutch's Nimrod Farm and wanted to share the experience with her children.

Béa and her older brothers, Christian and Alexandre,

all rode, participating in "winter challenges" where they piloted Shetland ponies over tiny jumps and played games on horseback. They also competed in horseball, an athletic mash-up of polo, rugby and basketball that was founded in Argentina and is popular in Europe.

Four years of horseball gave Béa a rock-solid seat and a drive to win. "Growing up with two brothers, I was very competitive," she says with a smile. "I don't like to lose."

She moved on to dressage and hunters, taking lessons

but riding mostly for pleasure.

At 14, Béa's life took a detour when her family left Paris for Brussels. The move proved challenging for the self-described "hardheaded and impatient" teenager. "I stopped riding, and I kind of went off the rails," she admits.

Elizabeth remembers the period well: "Béa had no direction; she was just going through the paces. She was lost."

Help came in an unexpected package. A family friend had a talented gray PRE mare

named Delegada X, aka "DeeDee," and wanted a stable for her. Elizabeth had recently sold her own horse and had a free stall in Brussels. The friend agreed but said, "The deal is, your daughter gets to ride her."

A month later, DeeDee belonged to Béa. Says Elizabeth, "We got the horse to keep Béa out of trouble, but those two were meant to be together."

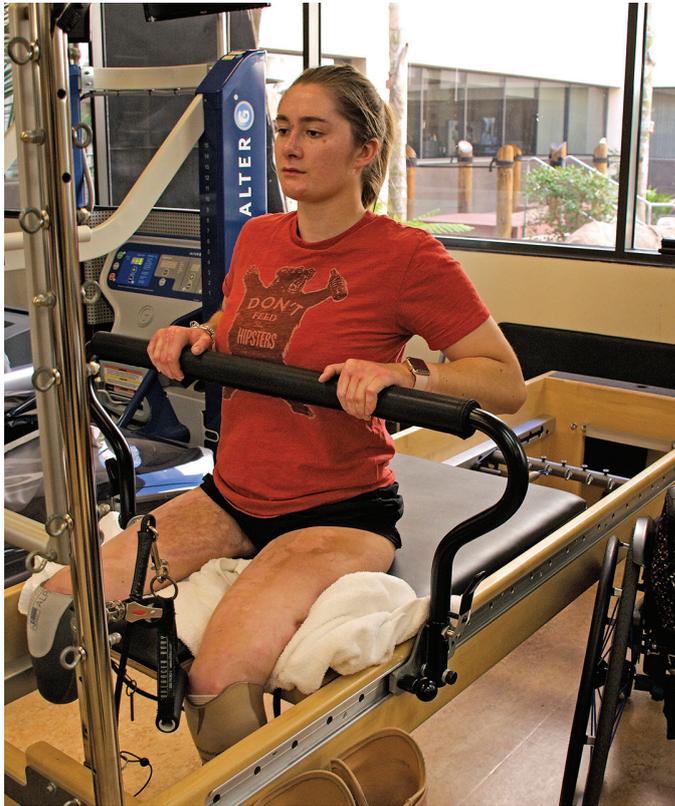
Béa began riding regularly again and taking lessons with Dossin. "After I got back to horses I was much happier," she says. "I liked dressage. I liked the challenge of being able to move the horse without people noticing what I was doing."

Life was good. Béa was doing better in school and had begun making plans for after graduation. She wanted to go to college in California and study business—specifically entrepreneurship and innovation.



A great sense of humor helped Béa de Lavalette cope with more than 10 surgeries and four months in the hospital after she survived a bomb detonation at the Zaventem International Airport in Brussels, Belgium, in 2016.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH DE LAVALETTE



## KEEPING BÉA ALIVE

At the military hospital, surgeon and burn specialist Dr. Michel Van Brussel was standing by when Béa arrived by helicopter. Assessing her injuries, which included flash burns over 35 percent of her body, he wrote “blast” on a piece of paper, and she was rushed to the emergency department. There, her condition rapidly deteriorated, and she was prepped for a surgery that would last seven hours, with four doctors in attendance.

**Right:** Béa de Lavalette’s trainer brought her beloved horse Delegada X to the rehab hospital to visit, and on the day she was released, de Lavalette took her first ride aboard “DeeDee.”  
PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH DE LAVALETTE

**Top Left:** Before going to the barn each morning, Béa de Lavalette spends time at the gym at the San Diego Naval Medical Center building her strength and stamina. KELLY SANCHEZ PHOTO

**Bottom Left:** The desire to ride Delegada X once again provided Béa de Lavalette with motivation after months in the hospital and a doctor’s pronouncement that she’d never walk again.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH DE LAVALETTE

Equestrians in France and Belgium showed their support for Béa de Lavalette while she was undergoing multiple surgeries to repair the damage from the bomb's blast, and the hashtag #prayforbea went viral, as people began sending prayers, photos and positive energy from around the globe. *PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH DE LAVALETTE*



Van Brussel took the lead to repair the damage to her abdomen. “What we found was quite astonishing,” he recalls. “There were two holes in the stomach—something went in and came out the other side. The spleen was completely destroyed and had to be removed, and there was quite a lot of damage in the left lobe of the liver. She also had a severe rupture of the diaphragm.”

A former military surgeon in Afghanistan, Van Brussel is no stranger to traumatic injuries, but the bomb that exploded beside Béa was something else. Packed with nails, bolts and other pieces of metal, it was designed to inflict maximum damage on its victims.

A follow-up CT scan revealed the source of the damage to her abdomen: a nearly two-inch piece of metal that had come to rest at her 12th vertebra. “It hadn’t penetrated the nerves,” says Van Brussel, “but still there was nerve compression due to the trauma.”

On March 23 Béa was transferred to the University Hospital of Leuven, outside Brussels, where Dr. Paul Vanderschot successfully removed the chunk of metal in her back, and Van Brussel treated her burns.

Elizabeth arrived that day and was met at the airport by friends from the stables. “Our horse people really rallied,” she says. “They stayed at the military hospital

all day on March 22nd, they kept an eye on me, *and* they took care of DeeDee.”

“The horse people from France and Belgium were totally amazing,” adds Béa. “A lot of them had watched me grow up. We were a tight family.”

She underwent 10 additional surgeries to complete skin grafts, repair and stabilize damaged vertebrae with titanium rods, and remove pieces of shrapnel from all over her body. There were also grueling procedures to treat her burns and clean her wounds. To ease Béa’s suffering, doctors placed her in a medically induced coma for nearly a month.

After intensive efforts to save her lower legs failed, doctors performed below-the-knee amputations.

It was a blow to the medical team as well as to Béa and her family, but inside her room in the intensive care unit, the focus was strictly on the positive. “We got through it with a lot of gallows

“There was no pity allowed — only laughter and bad jokes.”

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humor,” Elizabeth recalls. “There was no pity allowed—only laughter and bad jokes.”

In a Facebook post dated April 3, 2016, Elizabeth wrote, “Please remember what is important: Béatrice is alive. She will recover. Her spirit is intact. The only thing



Béa de Lavalette lost her lower legs and nearly her life in the 2016 Belgian airport terrorist bombing, but she's remained driven and relentlessly positive thanks in part to a special horse and a Paralympic dream. *JOSEPH NEWCOMB PHOTO*

September; walk across the stage the following May to graduate; compete at the 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo.

"It was my only way of saying that my life was not over," she says.

She also refined her college plan to follow a new path in business—pioneering adaptive sports equipment for disabled athletes.

Nobody who knew her was surprised. "Béa's always been tough," says Elizabeth. "That's how she survived this."

But transferring from the ICU to in-patient rehab in Brussels was an especially difficult step on an already punishing journey. The daily physical therapy sessions and burn treatments took their toll, especially when friends who'd visited regularly left town for summer vacations. And then a rehab doctor pronounced, "You're paralyzed. You're never going to walk again."

Salvation came once again in the form of a horse, when Dossin and

Claire Feaux brought DeeDee to the rehab hospital for a visit. Photos show Béa, gaunt and pale, her once-long brown hair shorn, reaching up to embrace the mare. Days later, on her first day out of the hospital, barn grooms and friends lifted her fragile frame onto DeeDee's back. Another "click." Béa found the motivation to continue.

## A NEW REALITY

On Sept. 5, 2016, just 5 ½ months after the bombing, Béa accomplished the No. 1 goal on her wish list: joining her friends on the first day of school. At her high school graduation in May, she rolled her wheelchair to a walker, and with the help of prosthetic legs, stood up and haltingly walked across the stage to accept her diploma.

which has been damaged is the outer shell. We will ALL be there to support her in the future ... and love will make a big difference."

The hashtag #prayforbea went viral, and people began sending prayers, photos and positive energy from around the globe. Béa and her parents credit that energy, channeled through Reiki treatments, to healing her extensive burns, which the doctors warned could be disfiguring.

Béa spent nearly four months in intensive care. For a month after coming out of the coma, she rode a rollercoaster of emotions. And then, she says, "something clicked." Deciding she had to move on, she made a list of goals: join her friends on the first day of school in

COVER STORY

A year after the bombing, Béa de Lavalette rode Delegada X in her first para-dressage competition at the Haras de Jardy equestrian center outside Paris.  
*CHRISTIAN BILLET PHOTO*



As she wrote later, “Thank you to the doctor who told me I would never walk again. Challenge accepted.”

Getting back on the horse presented a different kind of test. She would have to learn to ride again, this time without legs to aid her. The damage to her lower back had also left her partially paralyzed, compromising her balance and mobility. But DeeDee seemed to know something had happened and took care of her wounded rider.

Each session in the saddle brought an increase in strength and feeling. “Every time I rode I could feel something more,” Béa explains. “Now I can feel touch and heat and temperature changes.”

A year after the bombing, Béa and DeeDee entered their first para-dressage competition at the Haras de Jardy equestrian center outside Paris. Béa had been given a Grade II classification in Belgium, but she chose to ride a Grade I test to see how DeeDee would react.

“On Day 1, everyone competed in one of the training rings, but on Day 2, I rode in the main arena in front of *everyone*,” Béa remembers. “I wasn’t afraid. I was excited to get back out there.”

The ride went well, earning them a 78 percent, even with a few unprompted trot steps—their first since the bombing. As she exited the arena, Béa deadpanned, “OK, not afraid to trot anymore.”

Last fall, Béa made good on her promise to move to California. She lives in San Diego and will start college at the University of San Diego this fall. Through para-equestrians Angela Peavy and Rebecca Hart, she met para-dressage rider Holly Bergay, who in turn introduced her to trainer Shayna Simon, who’s based at Shannon and Steffen Peters’ Arroyo Del Mar facility.

Simon has been working with Béa and DeeDee since January, getting to know what the pair can do and tailoring her sessions according to how Béa is feeling on any given day.

“A lot of people in this situation would break down and say it’s not possible, but Béa never makes excuses,” says Simon. “Every time she rides, she climbs over another mountain. She’s doing things she never thought she could do without legs. If she gets scared or loses her balance,



“DeeDee is my legs,” says Béa de Lavalette. “I didn’t know I’d be able to do this again, but I’m doing things like shoulder-ins and half-passes better than I could before.” JOSEPH NEWCOMB PHOTO

she pushes through it, and DeeDee is right there with her. That mare loves her and would do anything for her.”

Given the chance to one day compete for Belgium, France or the United States, Béa doesn’t hesitate. “I’d be very happy to ride for the U.S.,” she says. “I always knew I was going to come here for college and want to stay here afterwards.”

## CHOOSING TO MOVE ON

Most days before she heads to the stable, Béa spends hours in a windowed, ground-floor gym at San Diego’s prestigious Naval Medical Center. She works on her own on a semi-recumbent elliptical bike and a Pilates reformer to build her strength and stamina, and the staff assists her with ambulation. There are regular visits to the prosthetics clinic as well as massages and dry-needling treatments to ease chronic muscle pain and stiffness.

Naval Medical Center certified athletic trainer and physical therapy assistant Michael Podlenski believes Béa's athleticism and fitness will go a long way to facilitate her progress. "She may try to do something, and her body doesn't work the way it used to, but it's definitely an advantage that she has been fit and active," he says. "Your neural pathways may have been disrupted, but there's still a patterning."

The rhythmic, reciprocal movement of the horse offers a kind of therapy all its own—strengthening not only her core, but also stimulating her brain's vestibular and proprioceptive systems, which affect balance and spatial orientation as well as body awareness.

"DeeDee is my legs," says Béa. "I didn't know I'd be able to do this again, but I'm doing things like shoulder-ins and half-passes better than I could before."

She's been back to the Brussels airport half a dozen times since the bombing without feeling anxiety, but cantering—which echoes the feeling of being lifted off the ground by the blast—proved a significant hurdle after she returned to riding. "The body will always remember, and it just freaked me out," Béa explains.

She climbed another mountain this June, when she and DeeDee, guided by Simon, took their first canter steps in a round pen. "It was very bumpy and all over the place, but I convinced Shayna to do it again so I could do it properly," Béa says. "The second time was more controlled, because I knew how to position myself and how to adapt to DeeDee's movement. Now, every time I canter, I know what to expect, what to ask for, and how to ask."

Elizabeth is quick to credit the doctors who saved her daughter's life, but she has no doubt about the role a certain gray mare has played in her recovery. "Dr. Van Brussel saved Béa, but DeeDee brought her back to who she is now," says Elizabeth. "We have our daughter because of those two souls—along with prayers from

people all over the planet."

Béa calls Van Brussel a "superhero," but he shrugs off the accolade. "We just stitched together the things that were broken," he says. "Béa is making a life with those things, and that is far more important than any surgery we could do.

"I see a lot of people who get hurt," he continues, "and they have scars on their bodies and on their souls, and then you see people who say, 'I've got disabilities, but I have a lot of opportunities too. This is not the end.' Béa and her family, they are madly positive."

"I wouldn't wish this on anyone, but I also wouldn't take it back."

—ELIZABETH DE LAVALETTE

"We never have been angry," says Elizabeth. "What happened, happened."

Béa agrees. "After I got out of my coma, somebody asked if I was angry, and I said, 'Who do you want me to be angry with? The bombers blew

themselves up.' The way I see it, it's the deed, not the religion."

She pauses. "I wouldn't wish this on anyone, but I also wouldn't take it back. It hasn't stopped me from living my life. Yes, some days it sucks, but so much has happened that is good, and I have so many opportunities in front of me now."

In March, at an event in Brussels commemorating the two-year anniversary of the bombings, a tearful Béa offered a message of hope to those assembled. "We can't change or fix what happened, but we can choose to move on," she said. "My injuries have given me superhuman strength because I can help other people. If I can overcome what happened to me, so can others.

"We have persevered, and we have healed," she added. "We do this to prove that we are stronger than hatred and ignorance." 🕒

To follow Béa de Lavalette's journey, visit [BeaParathlete.org](http://BeaParathlete.org).

# FINDING COMMON GROUND

Shayna Simon worked for Anabel and Klaus Balkenhol in Germany and apprenticed in other barns before launching her own business, but she had no experience coaching a para rider. So when she accepted Béa de Lavalette and DeeDee into her program, she initially wondered if she should approach their lessons differently, or whether in her own training rides on DeeDee she should avoid giving the mare leg aids, to replicate what the horse might feel with de Lavalette in the saddle.

“I quickly realized I just needed to understand where Béa is coming from and then figure out ways to prepare her for what she’s going to do,” says Simon.

In the months since they began working together, Simon has seen de Lavalette make enormous strides, all while continuing to recover from her traumatic injuries, and she has no doubt Béa will continue to progress.

“Béa has always been willing to work hard, and she’s stubborn in a way I respect,” says Simon. “She’s now opening herself up to how hard dressage is and learning what her capabilities and challenges are. And I work with DeeDee on the same things I’d work on with any horse, things like how to collect, how to sit, how to make a smooth transition.

“Just because it’s para-dressage doesn’t mean it’s easy,” she adds with a smile.

“A lot of people in this situation would break down and say it’s not possible, but Béa never makes excuses,” says Shayna Simon (*right*), who trains Béa de Lavalette aboard her horse

Delegada X.  
JOSEPH NEWCOMB PHOTO

