

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF...

In the articles entitled "From the point of view of ...", we tell the story of an expatriate who is living in the Netherlands. In each edition, we interview an expatriate, each time from a different country and each time in a different position (the person who was placed here by the employer, came here on his or her own initiative, the partner, the family members, etc.) For this issue of The XPat Journal we interviewed Thierry Schmitter, from France, who grew up in the Netherlands (attending the Lycée Français), studied Maritime Technology in Delft, and now works for the European Patent Organization as a Patent Examiner.

Thierry Schmitter

Photo: Sander van der Borch

When Thierry comes towards you, the first thing that comes to mind is the anecdote he shares in an interview. In London for the Paralympics, he was approached by a little boy who first stated the obvious, as little children do: “You are in a wheelchair,” but then added the most inspiring words he could have uttered: “Then you must be an athlete.”

In November 1998, Thierry was climbing a frozen waterfall in the Swiss Alps. Having reached the summit, he stepped on a snow slab, was dragged down and fell down the waterfall he had just climbed. By the time he reached the bottom, he had broken his back. “I was immediately transported by helicopter to the Swiss Paraplegic Center (a hospital and revalidation center in one) where, within five days, they informed me of the severity of my situation,” he says. “Usually, they wait a few weeks to break the news, but in my case, given my personality and the irrefutability of my state, they decided to inform me straight away. This way, I could immediately start focusing on how I was going to redirect my life.” At the time, despite being an engineer, Thierry had moved to Switzerland with his wife, with the intention of running a gîte (a vacation home) in the mountains, while he would become a professional mountain guide who took their guests out mountaineering. Now, he wanted to make sure he could still provide for his wife and three children – and needed to find a new way to do this.

“Based on my qualities and experience, I was accepted to work for the European Patent Organization,” Thierry tells, “and I consider myself very fortunate to have been given this opportunity.” Being the consummate athlete and fiercely independent, Thierry soon started looking for ways to engage in sports that would help him feel completely free of physical restrictions. “At first I started sailing in catamarans, developing a special harness for myself that would give me freedom of movement, while allowing me to be in control.” Soon he discovered the 2.4mR; a sailing boat that is ideal for handicap-integrated sailing, as the sailor does not move once in the boat and can make the necessary adjustments for optimal sailing from his seat. “I love the feeling of freedom sailing the 2.4 gives me; I don’t have to ask anyone to do anything for me,” he enthuses. Soon he started sailing at a competitive level, entering the Paralympics for the first time in Athens in 2004, then again in China in 2008 and in London in 2012, winning the bronze medal in

2004 and in 2012, as well as a three times gold in the world championships of 2009, 2010 and 2011. “Once again, I have been very fortunate, working for the EPO,” he says, “they have given me the freedom to practice for the sports events.” When it comes to funds, Thierry explains: “Finding a sponsor is very time-consuming and hard work: I would rather spend that time and effort working on generating my own income. Still,” he adds, “All sponsors are welcome! Particularly now that I will be shifting my efforts towards kite-surfing and developing the appropriate equipment for that. Fortunately, I do already have a few sponsors who supply me with materials.”

How would Thierry describe himself? “Well, there’s one thing it never takes long for others to notice: I’m stubborn,” he states matter-of-factly. “And I don’t give up. And I’m not one for talking very much. You become this way if you do outdoor sports: it’s you and the elements. If you spend a lot of time with other people you develop certain social skills that you can apply, if you choose to do so, to achieve what you want. If it’s just you and nature, there is nothing to ‘manipulate’, no one to intimidate. You are what you DO and not what you SAY. A direct quality that follows from this is: humility. Once you are out there, alone with the elements and pushing your limits, there is no mercy; if you can’t do it, you won’t succeed – so you learn not to overestimate yourself. It’s good to be satisfied, but that doesn’t mean you should stop trying to improve. The challenge and joy comes from developing yourself – and the sense of achievement once you have overcome barriers and pushed yourself a step further. When you practice sports at a high level, you have to be stubborn, but if you are not humble you might become arrogant. It’s a lesson I try to teach my children too; teenagers can think they’re pretty hot stuff... I tell them, ‘You can think you’re The Man, but maybe you can be better’ -

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Photo: Diana Bogaards

not because I want them to be frustrated, but because I want them to find the motivation to work harder on developing themselves. And I remind them that, no matter how much they believe in themselves, they must always respect others.” He gives a lopsided grin: “I have my moments of moralizing – it’s what you do when you’re a dad.”

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Speaking of being a dad, Thierry remarks: “I have a dominant personality, but that does not mean I want my children to follow in my footsteps. I encourage them to make their own choices and to choose their own path. I tell them: don’t be a follower, make your own plans and aspire to more. Not at the expense of others, but always

with respect for those around you. Don’t look to others to give you what you want in life; depend on your own two hands and your own capabilities. And when you come to a point when you have to decide what you want to do with your life, go in search of your passion and never base your decision on what you think others want you to do. And most importantly: if you want to really achieve something, compromise is not the best approach. You will have to make choices – and you should be grateful you actually have the luxury of making choices.”

If aliens from Jupiter were to land on Earth, what would Thierry want them to see? “Oh...” he hesitates, taken aback. “Why would they want to come here?! I’d send them back; there’s not enough space here to be free and the human race is rapidly destroying what is beautiful about this planet. Things were better a few centuries ago; people did not have the option of accumulating and aspiring to vast wealth, and they lived in harmony with na-

ture and respected it. America, for instance, before the Europeans arrived, must have been a fantastic place to live. The way the Indians coexisted with nature – instead of claiming it and taming it.” Is there anything on Earth that Thierry would recommend the aliens take back to their planet with them? “If there’s wind and space; *me*. At least for a while,” he answers without a moment’s hesitation, eyes gleaming, as he fidgets with restless anticipation at the thought of the sheer possibilities.

Coming back to the little boy who remarked that Thierry must be an athlete, Thierry remarks: “That is one of the wonderful consequences of how the London Paralympics were profiled. The Paralympics used to feel like an event that was organized out of some sense of societal obligation, rather than being a real sport. Now we have been portrayed as superhumans: people who can achieve the impossible, who have something extra that regular athletes don’t have. It has without a doubt inspired a whole generation. We owe this, among others, to the fact that, in Britain, many athletes with physical disabilities are veterans – so they are seen as double heroes. First, they fought for their country and now they are competing on behalf of their country.” He adds: “That is one of the things that makes the Olympic Games so special; athletes participate in World Championships on behalf of themselves, while in the Olympics, they are there to represent their country. It’s a completely different type of competition.”

To the question of whether Thierry has any dreams, he gives me an answer that can be considered quintessentially Thierry: “I don’t think in terms of dreams – that implies the possibility that they might not come true. I prefer the word *plans*.” He leans in intently to make sure I’ve heard him and when I acknowledge his message with a slight nod, he sits back and gives me a mischievous smile. ❧

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