

She had asked her sister, Carlotta Brelsford Cuerdon '80, to pull over during their drive from Putney to Madison, WI, for the 2018 U.S. Para-Cycling National Championships. Cuerdon knew Dana planned to stop along the way to train for the race, but when it started to pour she assumed they would just keep driving.

Not the case.

"It was terrible," Cuerdon said. "I looked at her out there—cars going by and spraying her with water—and thought, 'This is it. This dedication to training, even under the most adverse conditions; this is what separates the champions from the rest of us.'"

Indeed, Dana is a three-time Paralympian in women's handcycling. During her senior year at The Putney School she had an accident that paralyzed her from the waist down. For her, pushing through tough situations has been a way of life. Rain is the least of her challenges.

Last Summer, Dana won bronze medals in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games [Note: The 2020 games took place in the Summer of 2021]. She had been on track to win a gold but that got derailed when the chain on her handcycle slipped off mid-race. As her team fumbled to fix it, she watched in horror as seconds turned into minutes. By the time it was re-positioned, she couldn't make up for the lost time.

Despite the defeat, at age 52 she's at the top of her game in a sport she helped shape—and her coaches say she can still get faster. She's come a long way from the 17-year-old girl grappling with the fact that she would never walk again.

"You learn to adapt," Dana said. "Human beings are incredibly adaptable. You don't know it until you have to, but you find a way."

## FINDING HER FREEDOM

Everything changed on a sunny day in September. While hanging out with some friends at the school, Dana climbed about 40 feet up a tree in Tripping Field. She tried to move onto one of the smaller limbs but it wasn't strong enough to hold her weight and she fell, landing flat on her back.

"I was instantly paralyzed," Dana said.

Before the injury, she was a nationally ranked nordic skier and cyclist.

"Being an athlete was a huge part of my identity," Dana said. "It was where I got my confidence from and my self image."



Now, she was in a wheelchair and re-learning basic mobility skills.

"I was so impatient to get out of rehab—I got out in record time," Dana said. "I remember the physical therapist trying to teach me to do this, do that, and I had no patience—just send me home and I'll figure it out."

She was so eager to get back to normal, and she graduated as planned with the class of '87, but nothing was the same.

"I underwent this huge transformation, and came back to school and felt so distant from my friends," she said. "Like a world had opened up that I couldn't let them into, and I couldn't climb back into their world. It was really disorienting and I really struggled."

After graduating from Putney she moved to Miami and began wheelchair racing, particularly in marathons. She later went to California to attend UC Santa Barbara, and eventually returned to Vermont to finish up her degree at Marlboro College. It was during that time, in the mid-'90s, that she got her first handcycle. They were just starting to become available, but still few and far between.

"That was really great," Dana said. "I could ride my old bike routes, and I felt a new sense of freedom and strength, exercising that athletic part of myself."



In 2000 she and a group of other cyclists rode across the country for ten weeks to raise funds for disability-related causes. The next year she qualified for the United States Paralympics Cycling National Team—but it wasn't quite her time. That path was put on pause when she decided to take a break from the sport to raise her daughter, Willa '22—as a single mother, without the use of her legs. She had gotten married, then divorced soon after.

"I was very tired," Dana said with a laugh. "But you figure out pretty quick as a mom that you adore this little being. Like becoming disabled, you find a way. One day at a time, and the days accumulate and things change."

She didn't return to handcycling until eight years later, when a friend encouraged her to participate in the Burlington City Marathon and she won first place in her division.

"It just kind of gave me the bug again," she said. Handcycling was also becoming more