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Olympics

Angelelli endures as a competitor

Clinton Township swimmer, 39, will be going for a spot at the Paralympic Games.

John Niyo / The Detroit News

While the rest of us marvel at her perseverance, Cheryl Angelelli simply looks at the calendar and shakes her head.

It has been 25 years since Angelelli was paralyzed after a freak accident diving into a swimming pool in Mt. Clemens.

At the time, Angelelli was a 14-year-old freshman at Harper Woods Regina. Now, she's 39 and married, and when she's not working at her day job as director of marketing and public relations for the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan, she's right back where she started.

She's in the pool training.

Angelelli, of Clinton Township, will board a plane today for Minneapolis, where she'll compete in the U.S. swimming trials for the Paralympic Games this summer in Beijing, China.

"To think that I've been in this chair now longer than I was actually walking around, it's amazing to me," said Angelelli, a two-time Paralympian (2000, '04) who won a pair of bronze medals four years ago in Athens, Greece.

In February, Angelelli was honored with the Tony Filippis Courage Award at the 53rd annual Michigan Sports Hall of Fame induction ceremony. But Shawn Kornoelje, Angelelli's husband and swim coach, sees more than courage. He sees a dedicated athlete, one whose pool workouts he has tried to limit to 2-3 days a week to maximize her training and minimize wear and tear.

"She's competitive," said Kornoelje, who met his wife at the 2000 Paralympics in Sydney, Australia. "Doesn't matter if it's at work or in the pool or at home when we play Scrabble. It's just this competitive drive she has, and that has nothing to do with her wheelchair or disability."

Said Angelelli: "My husband always makes fun of me. He says, 'Can't you just relax and lay in the pool on a raft or something?' But I don't know how to do that. When I'm in the pool, I'm doing laps, or I'm racing."

Unfortunately for Angelelli, her best race has been taken away for this year's Paralympics. Angelelli won an individual bronze medal in the 200-meter freestyle at the 2004 Athens Games, but that event doesn't exist this time.

Instead, Angelelli will focus on the 100 freestyle -- she finished fourth in that race in Athens and is ranked No. 1 in the world in the event -- as well as the 50 free.

She'll be competing Friday and Saturday for one of 18 spots on the U.S. women's swim team.

If she qualifies, she'll likely be the oldest woman -- in any sport -- on the U.S. Paralympic team headed to Beijing. And, she insists, this time it'll be her last.

"I said the same thing after Athens," she said, laughing. "But this is definitely it."