



I HAVE A DREAM

Bebe Vio

BIG IDEAS III

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BIG IDEAS

All athletes experience setbacks. But to have your limbs - the very tools you use to practice your sport - taken away by an illness at a young age is a setback that many would never overcome.

Bebe Vio never gave up her dream of becoming a fencer, despite having her arms and legs amputated when she was eleven years old after suffering from fulminant meningitis.

Instead of abandoning her dream of going to the Olympics, she began training for the Paralympics from a wheelchair. Her unwavering determination to win, despite her physical challenges, made her a world champion fencer. She also established her own association, art4sport, to encourage other people to pursue the beauty of life through sport.

This is the eighth essay in the *Big Ideas* series created by the European Investment Bank.

The EIB has invited international thought leaders to write about the most important issues of the day. These essays are a reminder that we need new thinking to protect the environment, promote equality and improve people's lives around the globe.



I HAVE A DREAM

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Dreams have always been a constant in my life. We should all have dreams that we aspire to: they are the engine that drives everything.

I began dreaming when I was a young girl and I've never stopped!

I was five years old when I started to fence, I was quite good and almost immediately I began thinking about taking part in the Olympic Games. Then, along the way, I had to revise my plans a bit. At the end of 2008, when I was 11, I contracted fulminant meningitis. It was a dreadful situation and to save my life my legs had to be amputated from the knee down and my arms below the elbow. I was in hospital for 104 days and when I came out I couldn't wait to get started again. I was different, however, and the doctors said that I wouldn't be able to do the things I had done before. Right away I tried to work out how I could go back to my previous life and I based my plans on my main passions, the three S's: scouts, school and *scherma* (fencing).



SCOUTS, SCHOOL AND FENCING

2008: SCOUTS, SCHOOL AND FENCING

With the scouts it was easy because they are excellent at this sort of thing, and the day after I rejoined the group I was already running around the fields on my scout leader's back. In practice, I had never really left school since I didn't want to have to repeat the year – so the teachers came to give me my lessons in hospital. They were all fantastic and thanks to them I was able to continue my lessons at the same pace as my classmates. Then there was fencing. I could no longer fence standing up, so I turned to wheelchair fencing and I immediately fell in love with it too because it is even more beautiful. In a wheelchair, you can't retreat when you're afraid, so you have to take on your opponent. You have to be fearless and attack to avoid defeat. And I like to attack!

Gradually my dream took shape again but instead of the Olympics I began dreaming about the Paralympics! I started making plans and contacted anyone who could help me achieve my dream. All alone, you're nobody and you'll go nowhere. You can be as talented and strong as you

wish but you always need people in your life. I needed technicians to make a prosthetic aid to support the foil (I was and still am the only female competitor in the world who fences without arms), physiotherapists to help me physically prepare my "new" body for this new adventure, fencing experts to teach me how to fence in a wheelchair, and many other people who supported me.

I relied on the CIP, the Italian Paralympic Committee, which some dub the CONI (Italian National Olympic Committee) for disabled athletes. Until a few years ago the CIP lacked autonomy and came under the umbrella of CONI; however, in 2017 its Chairman Luca Pancalli managed to get it recognised as an independent body by the Italian Government. This was an important achievement, which will help the Paralympic world to flourish.

“ In a wheelchair, you can't retreat when you're afraid, so you have to take on your opponent. You have to be fearless and attack to avoid defeat. And I like to attack!



WHEELCHAIR FENCING

2010: WHEELCHAIR FENCING

In 2010 I started participating in wheelchair fencing and a couple of years later I was honoured and fortunate enough to attend the 2012 Paralympic Games in London and serve as a torch bearer at the opening ceremony. During the two weeks of the Games I also worked as a journalist for Sky Sport.

It was an amazing experience, which brought home to me even more how fascinating and exciting the Paralympic Games are. After that, I worked hard for four years, which was also hugely enjoyable. In 2011 I participated in my first international competition, the Under 17 World Championships, and I was lucky enough to win. The following year I officially joined the Italian National Paralympic Fencing Team and began to take part in the initial stages of the World Cup with the adults. At first, I was a bit apprehensive

because at 15 years of age I found myself competing against girls and women, some of whom were twice my age. They were all very nice to me though, because I was the youngest and the only one without all four

limbs. I didn't disappoint them: in all three competitions that I entered that year I got to the final although inevitably I became nervous and finished second each time. This made me so angry!

“ In 2011 I participated in my first international competition, the Under 17 World Championships, and I was lucky enough to win. The following year I officially joined the Italian National Paralympic Fencing Team.



The following year I took part in my first World Championships, in Budapest. What an amazing opportunity! The Olympic and Paralympic athletes were competing at the same time and more than once I found myself up on the piste fencing beside some of my absolute heroes: Elisa di Francisca, Arianna Errigo and Valentina Vezzali. I was the mascot of both Italian national teams and to me it felt like I was living a dream. It was just a pity that a Thai opponent, Jana Saysunee, brought me back down to earth. I suffered a resounding defeat, with the result that I was knocked out and finished tenth. I was raging – I had fenced badly and I burst into tears. My mother tried, without success, to console me. Then thankfully Valentina Vezzali came into the changing room and explained to me that finishing tenth at the World Championships at 16 years of age was already an excellent result and that she herself did not start winning her first major championships until the age of 21. I felt much better but promised myself that three years later at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio, I would be at the level of the Chinese girls, the best wheelchair fencers in the world.



FIRST PARALYMPIC GAMES

2016: FIRST PARALYMPIC GAMES

That was when I began winning. Starting in 2014, I managed to win the gold medal in every major competition that I entered: the Europeans in Strasbourg in 2014, the World Championships in Eger in 2015 and again the Europeans in Turin in 2016. Later in 2016 in Rio I experienced my first Paralympic Games.

While qualifying for the Games was fairly straightforward, combining school with my physical and fitness training was really tough: that same year I was also preparing for my final school exams and the months leading up to these two events,

one at the end of July and the other at the beginning of September, were gruelling. My teachers wanted me to dedicate most of my time to my studies whereas, more than anything, my trainers and sports coaches wanted me to train for the Paralympics!

At a certain point, my teachers realised the difficulties that I was facing and suggested that I drop out of school for that year in order to devote myself entirely to the sport. But I didn't agree – I wanted to do both and do them well. I wanted to get good results in my exams since the university course for which I had applied in Milan required a minimum grade of 75/100, but I also wished to finish on the podium at the Games because I had been winning everything for two years and certainly didn't want to miss out at the biggest competition of all!

“ Starting in 2014, I managed to win the gold medal in every major competition that I entered: the Europeans in Strasbourg in 2014, the World Championships in Eger in 2015 and again the Europeans in Turin in 2016. Later in 2016 in Rio I experienced my first Paralympic Games.



They were very difficult, exhausting months. In the morning I would go to school; in the afternoon I did some fitness training and in the evening I practised my fencing. I was physically and mentally shattered. I felt that everyone was down on me, that everyone was demanding so much from me and that nobody understood how I was feeling. In the end, I managed though. The exams went well and my final mark of 83/100 made me so happy.

I arrived in Rio along with the Italian Paralympic squad with a taste for victory in the individual competition, but especially in the team competition, even though we had very little chance of winning a medal. And I must say that, all in all, things went better than expected yet again, certainly thanks to the individual gold that I won against my arch enemies, the formidable Chinese, and then the unexpected and incredible bronze won with my team on the happiest day of my life. For now.



TOKYO 2020

PARALYMPIC GAMES

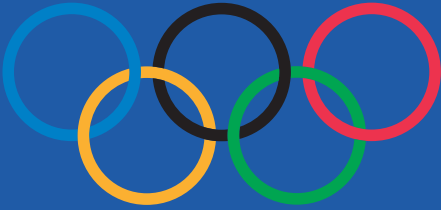


2020: TOKYO PARALYMPIC GAMES

Somebody said to me recently that all my dreams had been fulfilled and that there was nothing left for me to “achieve”. It’s true that in the last two years I’ve ticked off a number of objectives on my “wish list” – apart from my high school exams and taking part in the Paralympics I have travelled the world and met many famous and important personalities, I’ve written two books and “dabbled” in the world of TV where in 2017 I even presented my own show *La vita è una figata* (“Life is cool”). I have also worked on the film *Incredibles 2*, dubbing the voice of a new superhero into Italian, I’ve got my driver’s licence, and this year I started attending the American University of Rome, where I’m studying communication, international relations and marketing. However, I’m not content with that so now I’d like to raise the bar of Olympic dreams with my team – I would dearly love to win gold with my team-mates at the next Paralympic Games in Tokyo in 2020. It won’t be easy but it will certainly be beautiful and exhilarating.

“ You must work hard for dreams to become goals, otherwise they will remain dreams forever. You must believe, make plans, work hard and never lose sight of your objectives.

There’s one thing though that I always try to keep in mind: you must work hard for dreams to become goals, otherwise they will remain dreams forever. You must believe, make plans, work hard and never lose sight of your objectives. In fact, when I was preparing for Rio 2016 I put a countdown on my mobile phone 500 days before the Games and each morning I would wake up and say to myself, “Come on Bebe, get to work – soon you’ll be off to Rio...”. For Tokyo 2020, however, I’ve begun my countdown 1 000 days before the Games because it will be even harder this time and nobody wins anything by chance or luck.



CONI

Now that I'm living in Rome I'm very lucky to be able to prepare and train in facilities that are extremely well-equipped and organised, with many of my friends and team-mates from both the Olympic and Paralympic national teams. My days in 2018 are divided between studies and work, and the intensity of the programme will be stepped up by several notches as we get closer to 2020. In the morning I do an hour of fitness training starting at 7.30am then I attend my classes at university until lunchtime. In the afternoon I study, and at around 5pm I go training at CONI's Olympic Centre for the evening. It's a bit tiring but I really love it and I couldn't ask for more. In Rome I live on campus at the university, right in the city centre in Trastevere. It's a beautiful area and has a great nightlife, which I enjoy to the full with my room-mates and fellow students, who are all foreigners. Sometimes, we stay out late and the next morning it's a struggle to get up for training but that's okay – after all, I'm 21 and I also want to have some fun!

One of the great things about my university is that most of the students are foreigners and many of them don't know me. This enables me to lead a very relaxed life, along with many others of my own age who treat me simply as Beatrice, their fellow student.

When we are out in Rome and people stop me to ask for a selfie, sometimes I explain to the others that it was a friend or someone who had just mistaken me for somebody else and any time people talk about Rio or books or TV I have to think up all kinds of excuses, playing on the fact that they don't speak much Italian. Many of them don't even know that I am a fencer. One evening I arrived back late for a dinner party thrown by my room-mates, and when the guests saw me arriving with my fencing bag, which is huge and very long so it can hold the foils, one American girl asked me if I played golf!



**DREAMS THAT
EMERGE ALONG
THE WAY**

DREAMS THAT EMERGE ALONG THE WAY

Another of my dreams emerged suddenly, after I discovered at close quarters the world of disability and the world of Paralympic sport. This is a very difficult environment that is not well known but is powerful, full of humanity and involves truly wonderful people. My first heroes were Alex Zanardi and Oscar Pistorius. They're the ones who inspired me to get going again after my illness. I then met so many other great champions such as Francesca Porcellato, Italy's most successful Paralympian, and the youngest, Martina Caironi, who had her leg amputated and won the gold medal in the 100 metres in Rio. When she mounted the podium for the medal ceremony she asked me to look after her running blade, and it was fantastic to sing the Italian national anthem at the top of my voice holding tight the blade with which she had just won!

“ My parents and I decided to establish an association to help child amputees enjoy the beauty of life through sport.

Seeing the beauty, value and importance of practising sport, especially for people with disabilities, my parents and I decided to establish an association to help child amputees enjoy the beauty of life through sport. Called art4sport ONLUS, it helps child amputees who start practising a sport for fun but then really get into it, and as they get older start to get more serious – often with incredible results.

Since it was founded nine years ago, the NGO has grown a lot and is currently supporting 30 young people between the ages of five and 30 who are involved in a variety of Paralympic sports: from wheelchair fencing to basketball, from football to dance, from swimming to climbing, from equestrian sports to taekwondo, from skiing to triathlon, from athletics to canoeing, and others. Three of us took part in the Rio 2016 Paralympics and the dream now is to double that number at Tokyo 2020 to at least six!



Among the various events that we organise, there is one that is particularly dear to our heart, *Giochi Senza Barriere* “Games Without Barriers”. This sporting event is inspired by the TV show *Giochi Senza Frontiere* “Games Without Borders” but the difference is that the teams are composed of able-bodied and disabled competitors. We organise sporting challenges pitting one against the other and it’s not always the able-bodied team that comes out on top. Since 2016 we have hosted three editions of the event in the beautiful Stadio dei Marmi in Rome and *Giochi Senza Barriere* is now recognised as the top Paralympic event in Italy.

It is thanks to these experiences that I have a new dream: I’d like to help the Paralympic world, which is still seen as the “poor” cousin of the Olympics, to grow. And in the not too distant future – after taking part in Tokyo 2020, Paris 2024 and Los Angeles 2028 as an athlete, for instance – I’d like to become Chairman of the Italian Paralympic Committee and then of CONI, to be able to carry on the work of the current Chairmen and unify the two committees in a single large Italian Sports Committee.

This too is a crazy dream, which to most seems unattainable, but I believe it’s possible and, once the proper and necessary conditions are met, I’m certain that it can be achieved.

No dream is too big and you shouldn’t be afraid to dream. However, you must work tenaciously and with conviction, planning ahead and being proactive year after year so that your dreams are not left on the back burner. Because dreams are a part of life!

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BIOGRAPHY

Bebe Vio was born in Venice on 4 March 1997. Since childhood, she has always been full of life and had lots of interests: school, drawing, scouting and above all fencing. When she was 11, a sudden attack of meningitis robbed her of her arms and legs.

But one of her greatest wishes was to be able to get back to sport, and she succeeded in doing so with the help of art4sport ONLUS and a team of specialised technicians. Bebe became the first athlete in the art4sport team.

In early May 2010 Bebe contested her first official match in Bologna, and since then she has taken part in a growing number of ever more exciting and entertaining competitions.

After winning in the European championships and World Cup in 2014, in 2015 she was crowned paralympic world champion in the individual foil category of the fencing championships. A few days later she won the bronze medal in the team competition. In 2016 she was awarded the gold medal in the individual competition at the XV Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, and in 2017 she won her second paralympic world champion title in the individual foil category.

In 2018 she again won the gold medal at the European paralympic fencing championships.





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