

From Stroke-Survivor to Dragon Boater: Sandro François Shares His Story

When in their 20s, most people are thinking about college, job prospects, and unique Amazon finds; not dealing with a stroke, let alone two.

In 2010, athlete and 'gentle giant' Sandro François, experienced not one, but two strokes at the age of 25 and had to relearn everything again: how to speak, how to be independently mobile, how to manage in his new reality.

A new member of Montreal's Caravela dragon boat team, he shared his story with humor and thoughtful reflection.

The Scariest Day of His Life

The day started off normally enough. François was playing a PS3 game with his cousin Lenz when he remembers "suddenly feeling dizzy. I got up and went to the bathroom [but] fell to the floor." Scared and unsure, his roommates called an ambulance.

While the hospital told him he was fine ("without doing any real tests," François frowned) and he was sent home, this was clearly not the case. He was in extreme pain, holding his head "like it was about to explode." They went back to the Montreal General and was then told he was having a stroke.

He was transferred to the Montreal Neurological Institute, where he stayed a full month. Once released, his mom was set to return to Miami but that very night, he would experience another, much more severe stroke.

By some 'divine intervention' as François put it, his mother was delayed at the airport. "If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be talking to you today..."¹

Starting Over Again

As a former basketball and football athlete, François had always dreamt of a career in wrestling, but had never seriously pursued it. "My new dream is to start running again," he said, which he is working towards with [dedication and "slow but steady process."](#)

In relearning how to speak, to sit up independently, and navigate first in a wheelchair, then with a walker and canes, he keeps his eye on his objective.

¹ He related how the Montreal General Hospital at first assumed he was just drunk and initially refused him assistance; a case of discrimination he publicized in the media ([Montreal Man Turned Away by Hospital When Having a Stroke](#)).

From initially being told he would never walk or talk again, François defeated a sobering medical prognosis, and is an athlete, an actor, and frequently interviewed about accessibility. In fact, he was one of the participants in the 'Montreal Housemates' show on AMI (Accessible Media Inc)-TV (2016) which featured a group of people with disabilities navigating the challenges of living together (ironically, he would meet future Caravela captain, Josh Simmons via one of his roommates.)

François is also an amateur actor with [Le Théâtre Aphasique](#) which offers art and clinical workshops for people living with aphasia (a language disorder) or speech delays.

In recognition of the 10th anniversary of his strokes, François trained - and succeeded - to walk 10km; shocking predictions to the contrary.

Regaining Skills One Punch at a Time

One of François's main forms of physio has been [boxing training](#) with Wassim Fakhri, Founder and Head Coach at Universal Boxing Club. "He's helped me gain confidence again...boxing gives me self-discipline."



According to Fakhri, boxing is ideal for people recovering from strokes or living with disabilities, as it provides an effective blend of coordination and balance; some of François's biggest challenges. By training with intentionality, he has dramatically increased his core muscular strength and flexibility to the point of walking unassisted and even attempting to jump-hit the basketball baseboard ([AMI Télé - Ça Me Regarde](#) (Jan 22, 2022, Sur le Terrain segment).

So when Simmons invited him to join the [Caravela dragon boat team](#) (mostly for paddlers who are blind and visually-impaired), one would have assumed it would have been an instant success...but was it?

Adventures in the Boat

At races, François is a formidable sight. 6'6 and 300 lbs, other teams stare in awe as he approaches.

Yet in spite of his athletic background, it was a tricky transition to paddling.

The first problem was finding a sufficiently large paddle and life vest to accommodate his size. Then came the unnerving trek up and down the wobbly dock. "Getting to the boat is an adventure for me because I don't have the greatest balance," François laughed. "But then neither do the blind people so on that, we're on equal footing."

Loading *into* the boat was the next hurdle. While it was 'practical' to sit on the dock and slide in, "my ego took a beating," confessed François.

No Coddling in This Boat

While he tried hard, François was still lacking in cardio and endurance and would continually berate himself for what he felt was underperformance.

But the Caravela team would not let him put himself down. "They never got mad at me - that's the real reason I kept coming back. They never made me feel like I was dead weight even when I thought so myself."

With their support, he gained confidence and became more committed to the sport, guided by Nationally recognized Coach Magda Morawski.

"You feel like you matter in the team, they want me to be better," he reflected. When Morawski announced at a difficult practice, "'We're lucky we have Sandro now,' it made me feel like The Hulk."

Caravela's coach is anything but soft on the team. While some would assume overly cheerful and lenient leadership for a crew of people with special needs, Morawski "adjusted some of her demands but expects the same performance from us. It's like she knows it's within our capabilities," he reflected.

At Montreal's Quebec Cup Competition in September, François was doubtful about his ability to complete the infamous 2km (with 3 turns) race and asked if he should skip it for the best of the team. Before he had even completed his question, both Simmons and Morawski cut him off, adamant that he join them. While François recognized that the suggestion had been his, he admitted he would have been crushed if they had agreed he sit out the race.

Universal Accessibility

As a recently disabled individual, François is aware of the obstacles people with special needs encounter on a daily basis. He is a consultant with [Défi Sportif AlterGo](#) which makes accessibility [evaluations](#) of public places such as libraries and buildings. Together the team (composed of people with various limitations) identify possible barriers, risks, and oversights, 'giving a voice to the voiceless'. In fact, he was the model for the poster for accessibility month for several years and speaks about [invisible disabilities](#).



Surviving two strokes has made François appreciate each day with intentionality and gratitude. From “living aimlessly,” he has committed himself to “try to make the world a better place than before.” Getting a second lease on life has made him a veritable asset both in boxing and in the dragon boat.

Big in stature and large in spirit, François is the epitome of indomitable, fighting for Black, disabled, and athletic communities everywhere.