

Published in the Volkskrant, 15.09.09

‘My back is now better than last year’

INTERVIEW, RENATE GROENEWOLD

Four months after her hernia operation, the 3000m world skating champion is able to do everything again.

From our reporter
John Volkers

Torbole - She's had a lot of lucky, as well as successful surgery and great after-care. Four months after her hernia operation, the 3000m world skating champion is actually able to do everything again. 'I don't have any issues anywhere. My back is now better than last year'

She knocks on the white wooden table where she's sitting on a terrace on Lake Garda. Together with her skating team, she is undergoing the most difficult test of the summer.

'I am doing skating jumps, completing my strength training as before and working on my core with stability training. I don't think about it. I just do it. And it feels great. I trust my body.'

On 1st of May, that body was in pieces. For many years, Groenewold suffered from back problems, but now - after lifting a 30kg weight incorrectly - there was something really wrong. An MRI at the hospital in Assen showed it up the very same day.

'That Friday, I was the last one in the queue. The nurse who did the MRI, said: I've seen that before. Normally, they aren't allowed to make any comment. But it was so clear, that there was something wrong with the intervertebral disk.'

A day later, she was on the operating table at the private clinic of Dr Menno Ipreburg in Veenhuizen. 'I called Menno who I know well. I said, I need to be operated on as quickly as possible. He said, tomorrow. It can't get any quicker than that. I didn't need to go to the insurer to check whether it would be reimbursed. I'd pay it myself if needs be.

On that Saturday 2nd of May, there were three other people in the appointment book who hadn't been able to arrange things with their health insurers. I was actually number five in the queue, but Menno was able to do me straightaway that day. I am so privileged. The costs are now being negotiated.'

The back operation to lumbar L5, using a special endoscopic technique, took an hour longer than expected. 'You aren't put under a full anaesthetic. You've got to stay conscious. Lying on your side, they enter from the other side. I had a lot of painkillers, as otherwise the pain was unbearable. As he'd come close to my nerves, I would call out in pain.'

After two and half hours, she could go home. 'Neither on crutches, nor in a wheelchair. That's not going to happen to me. I am just so stubborn about stuff like that. After about two days, there was a television team from NOS and I wanted to do the interview standing. Otherwise, I would come across as pitiful. I ended up fainting. That's when I thought: Renate, let's take it easy'.

'I was allowed to walk around: fifteen minutes in the morning; 20 minutes in the afternoon; and another five minutes in the evening. A real top sporting mentality, you start your build-up straight away.'

'On day 10, I was allowed to go for a cycle. As soon as I woke, I didn't even have breakfast, but got on the bike, on a ladies bicycle. Too crazy for words, but that drive is in me.'

It was only during a training camp in Denmark that she found her rhythm again after the operation. 'At home, I was becoming depressed. I had no structure in my life.'

'Consequently, I said to my coach Gerard Kemgers that I wanted to go to Denmark no matter what. If Bert Borghans, our osteopath, picked me up there, it would all be ok. And that's what happened.'

I've made enormous progress. There was a lot of rehabilitation and aqua-jogging. If I gave my body the incentive, then it reacted the next day. The fact that I am now in such good condition is down to luck, or Bert, my osteopath. If I hear stories about other back patients such as Karin Ruckstuhl or Pieter van den Hoogenband, then it's gone well.'

'The last time that it was all very nerve-racking for me was when I went back on the ice which was at the start of July in Heerenveen. I was a tiny bit afraid. They had worked very closely to my nerves and it occurred to me that there mightn't be any control or the coordination would be missing. But there were no problems.'

'The story of my back is a unique story. I was terrified. To the point that I thought, this won't work; this was the end, the end of the skating career. However, now I am focusing completely on the month of February next year - The Winter Olympics in Vancouver. Nothing can throw me off balance now. If the autumn is difficult, I won't let myself get wound up.'

'I am six weeks behind in the season's training schedule. However, the doctor does say that my back is probably better than before. Last season I became world champion with a back in a much worse condition. I see it in myself: I want to do this one more time.'

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