

*Did you know Momentum Health Creekside's Physiotherapist Lee Sawka spent time as one of the carefully selected health care professionals providing support to athletes with the world renowned Cirque Du Soleil? Grab some popcorn and read her story below...*

## The Time I Ran Away With the Circus...

By Lee Sawka



Even before applying to become a physiotherapist, I had a tiny obsession with Cirque Du Soleil (CDS). I had seen many of the shows live and had all of the DVDs and music. Once I became a physiotherapist I applied to work with CDS. I had almost forgotten about it, as I didn't hear anything for almost 2 years when I got a phone call letting me know that they had an opening at International Headquarters (IHQ) in Montreal.

I immediately accepted the position and was flown out to Montreal and provided with a suite downtown. I somehow managed to make my way through the bus and metro system my first day of work with my grade nine French skills and arrived at IHQ (I would soon learn that speaking English was not an asset!)

When I arrived at IHQ, I was completely blown away by the facility. It was a huge creative laboratory where people from all disciplines hailing from all over the world gather to create CDS shows. In addition to a physical fitness training room, the Studio housed various acrobatic and artistic training rooms with trampolines, trapeze equipment and various apparatus' that the artists use for training. It has over 1200 full time employees and even has a garden complete with various vegetables and herbs. The harvest goes to prepare meals at the cafeteria, and any surplus is given to staff.



Upon being hired by CDS, performers come to the Studio at IHQ in Montreal for a few weeks or months of training before joining a show. The majority of the artists undergo four months of general training, during which time they'll learn their routines, develop their characters, learn to apply their own makeup (all performers do their own makeup), and become part of the CDS family. Performers also are sent to IHQ when they are seriously injured during a show and cannot perform to complete their rehabilitation.

Performers come from a variety of backgrounds, including artistic and tumbling, acrobatic gymnastics, swimming, diving, dance, singing, music and circus arts.

The Studio employs close to one hundred trainers from around the world dedicated to working with the artists. These trainers specialize in such fields as dance, theatre, singing, rehabilitation and acrobatics. My role was to take care of all of the newly hired artists and manage their injuries.

A typical day for me would start with morning meetings with the rehabilitation team and the coaches/trainers of the artists. After that I would spend several hours watching training and was able to provide physiotherapy on the spot if anyone was injured. This ensured that they were in the best shape possible and helped prevent more serious injuries. I also watched acting, dancing and choreography classes.

In the afternoon I would treat injuries in the physiotherapy area (which consisted mostly of taping and bandaging blisters and burns from the trampolines!). I also saw overflow patients from the other physiotherapists which included treating clowns, musicians and vocalists. I accompanied artists to their doctor's appointments and spent a lot of time with interpreter's to discuss rehabilitation for those that didn't speak English.

On the weekends I was able to spend some time on the Big Top show Totem, which was in Montreal at the time. This allowed me a "behind the scenes" look at what really went on during a show. The physiotherapists were the first responders and the only medical staff on the show. There are generally only 2 physiotherapists and they provide treatment before, during and after the show. Tension was very high during the dangerous acts and while the audience enjoyed the show, everyone backstage held their breath until the act was done without anyone getting injured.

It was interesting to get to know the performers as people and I was exposed to many different cultures and customs. You become very close with the performers and they become like family. I was ultimately offered a 2-year position on Alegria, which was touring Europe, but unfortunately had to decline, as I had to go for surgery on my ACL and do my own rehabilitation! I am very grateful for this amazing experience and opportunity and I will never forget my time working with CDS. It has elevated my skills when working with

athletes, dancers and gymnasts and I have a greater appreciation for treating people from different cultures and language barriers.

*At Momentum Health, we know not all injuries occur under the Big Top! We are proud to work with clinicians who draw from years of exciting and diverse experience's that ensure you receive the highest standard in innovative and quality care for recovery with your injury. Call any one of our city wide locations to book an assessment today.*

**Lee Sawka – Physiotherapist**



*Lee graduated from the University of Manitoba with a Bachelor of Physical Therapy degree in 2006. She was a physiotherapist with the Calgary Police Service and the Canadian Back Institute for five years before she worked in Montreal at International Headquarters with Cirque Du Soleil. She is currently a Research Clinician at the University of Calgary with the Kinesiology Department's study for concussion management in hockey players and a previous study on injury prevention in soccer players. It has always been important for Lee to remain educated in the latest information and techniques related to providing superior therapy. She is certified in acupuncture with the Acupuncture Foundation of Canada and Gunn IMS*

*(Intramuscular Stimulation). She is also certified in spinal and peripheral manipulation and completed her orthopaedic level 2 upper and lower quadrant training in manual therapy. In her spare time, Lee enjoys downhill and cross country mountain biking, running, soccer, golfing, snowboarding and reading.*