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Life Under the Big Top

Current and former Cirque du Soleil performers talk about what it takes to “deliver the magic” for 10 shows in five days.

By Emily Beers

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Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil

Wellington Lima bursts through one of the back doors of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino. He has a huge smile on his face, but hidden behind his ever-present grin is concern.

“I dropped my bike on the way here. I got in a little accident,” says Lima, who drives a motorcycle to work. He brushes himself off and downplays the accident, but through his laughter you can see he’s in pain.

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He has a long night ahead of him—two two-hour shows, the second of which ends at 11:30 p.m.

It's a regular day for Lima, who works a job that has him flipping and twisting and flying through the air in front of hundreds and sometimes thousands of spectators.

Lima, 33, is a trampoline acrobat in Cirque du Soleil's *Michael Jackson One*, and he's been performing in two shows a night and 10 shows a week for 15-plus years.

Off to Join the Circus

Joining the circus wasn't Lima's childhood dream. In fact, signing a contract with Cirque happened almost accidentally.

Born and raised in Recife, Brazil—one of the biggest metropolitan areas of the country—Lima grew up in a humble home.

"My house, it was a very simple house," Lima said of the two-bedroom home he shared with his mother,

grandmother, uncle and siblings. He is the second oldest of six children, and Lima and his five brothers and sisters all have different fathers. Lima has never met his.

"My mother never told me who he was," he said with a shrug.

"I don't want to say life was difficult in Brazil, but it ... it was challenging. There were many challenges. You have to make choices," he said.

Since he was a small child, Lima has continuously chosen to follow his passions, sometimes to the point of being unruly.

"I was a bit of a wild kid. I used to skip school and go to the beach and hang out there when I was 9," he laughed.

Eventually, he found an outlet for his abundant energy through sports. As a child, Lima got involved in capoeira, a Brazilian martial art that combines self-defense with dance, acrobatics and music. The acrobatic aspect of capoeira was what really attracted Lima.



Courtesy of Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino

A landmark on the Las Vegas Strip, the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino is home to the Cirque du Soleil show *Michael Jackson One*.

"My family didn't want me to do capoeira or gymnastics, and they weren't able to financially support it, but I was always going after what I believed was good, and sometimes I'd go against my family and go train," he said.

He added: "I was very lucky that I was able to follow my dreams."

So Lima kept pursuing acrobatics, and opportunities kept presenting themselves. In 1993, a friend introduced him to the trampoline. He started competing in the sport of trampoline, and in 1997 he won the national championship for his age group. Before he knew it, Lima had managed to become skilled enough to get accepted into the largest theatrical producer in the world: Cirque du Soleil.

**"I was very lucky that I was able
to follow my dreams."**

—Wellington Lima

The world-renowned Cirque du Soleil started in Baie-Saint-Paul, a small village east of Quebec City, Canada. In the early 1980s, a small theater group—essentially street performers—entertained the village by walking on stilts, juggling, dancing and playing music.

Two of the street performers, Guy Laliberte and Gilles Ste-Croix, had an idea to start touring the province and showing off their skills. Pretty soon, their performance group grew into a proper circus—what is today Cirque du Soleil.

Crowds everywhere loved Cirque, and by the 1990s and early 2000s, it had expanded from one unique show to 19 different shows in nearly 300 cities around the world. Today the company exceeds US\$810 million in revenue a year.

The World of Cirque du Soleil

In 1997, when Lima was 18, he decided to watch an audition for Cirque at the National Circus School in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Someone recognized Lima and asked him to audition.



Courtesy of Wellington Lima



Courtesy of Wellington Lima

Raised in Brazil, Wellington Lima used his acrobatic talents to create a long career in Cirque du Soleil.

"I remember that many people were so nervous for the audition, and I didn't feel any pressure," he said of being unexpectedly thrown into the mix of 120 hopeful candidates.

The audition was fairly simple. Lima had to show some basic gymnastics skills, as well as some trampoline movements. After the athletes were assessed, the field was narrowed to 20, and then to just 10. Lima was one of the 10 and was offered a spot as an acrobat in Cirque.

His family wasn't thrilled about his joining the circus, which meant Lima would have to move to the United States, and Lima admits it wasn't an easy move to make.

"It was a hard decision. And my family was never really behind it But I followed my intuition and trusted that this was a good decision. It was hard, you know. And I remember when Cirque du Soleil bought my (plane) ticket. It was from May until July. I thought I was only going

to be there for two months," Lima said.

Fifteen years later, he's still with the company.

Lima didn't always perform in Las Vegas. When he first moved to the United States, he was placed in Orlando, Fla., where he worked from 1998 to 2004 as a trampolinist in a Cirque show called *La Nouba*.

Still a teenager, Lima barely spoke any English.

"Well, I knew the verb 'to be' and could count to 100," he said, laughing at the memory.

Despite the challenges he faced, Lima knew he had made the right decision in joining Cirque. He immediately started earning more money than he would have earned back home in Brazil, and he saved enough to send a portion of his paycheck home to his mother every month, something he continues to do to this day.



Courtesy of Wellington Lima



Impressive athletes combine their physical abilities with pageantry to make Cirque du Soleil shows a memorable experience.

Eventually, Lima was even able to buy his mother a new home, a three-bedroom house in Brazil.

"There are four people living there now," Lima said. "My mom, my sister and her two kids."

After performing in *La Noubu*, Lima joined *Dralion*, a show that toured Europe, Asia and Australia from 2004 until 2009. In late 2009, he moved to Las Vegas, where he joined *Viva Elvis*, a show that was cancelled in 2012. Today, he performs as a trampolinist in the 63-person production of *Michael Jackson One*.

Lima feels blessed to have had the opportunity to work on four different shows. Building and choreographing a new performance is one of Lima's favorite parts of his job.

"You get to create something unique with good people and put your own vocabulary on it," said Lima, who now speaks perfect English with just a small Brazilian-Portuguese accent. He's also picked up passable Russian and Spanish.

"I work with a lot of Russians, and I felt it would be respectful to learn Russian," he said.

Lima believes part of Cirque's magic comes from its international representation. Cirque employs 5,000 people from more than 50 different countries. Over the years, the show has entertained more than 100 million spectators in more than 40 countries on every single continent except Antarctica.

"They're finding the best people, not just from the United States but from all over the world . . . People from different countries (come) together—the best that (each) country has to offer," Lima said.

He added: "Representing Brazil made me feel like I had a lot to prove."

This diversity sometimes brings unlikely nations together.

"In our show, there are Koreans, Japanese and Chinese on the same team. Nobody gets into politics. They're on the same team," Lima said.

"In the show, there's one mission: to become one. And you can really feel that."

The Life of an Acrobat

Thirty-four-year-old Tammy Stauffer met Lima when she was a gymnast performing on men's high bar in *Viva Elvis* in Las Vegas.

Stauffer followed a very different path than Lima in finding her way to Cirque. For the single mother of a 6-year-old son named Justin, joining Cirque was Stauffer's way of gaining closure on a gymnastics career that was cut short.

As a junior elite gymnast at the age of 13, Stauffer was one of the best in Canada, and although she wasn't old enough to make the Senior National Team, she was considered an Olympic hopeful even then. But injuries prevented Stauffer from qualifying for the highest level of competition. She tore her Achilles twice, but after she retired from the sport as a teenager, something kept telling her she wasn't finished with gymnastics. Something kept telling her to give Cirque du Soleil a chance. So she did.

Although she had been out of the sport for 13 years, Stauffer knew she'd be able to get much of her gymnastics skills back pretty easily. She never attended a formal audition; instead, she submitted a video of her gymnastics and was offered a position in *Viva Elvis* in Las Vegas. She didn't hesitate to sign the contract.

What Stauffer didn't know at the time was how difficult the circus lifestyle would be.



Courtesy of Tammy Stauffer

Her gymnastics career cut short by injury, Tammy Stauffer put her skills to use in Cirque du Soleil.

"I packed three suitcases—one for me and two for Justin," Stauffer said. She then hopped on a plane with her toddler and landed in a crazy city where she would live and perform for the next two years and 10 months.

Pretty soon, Stauffer was putting in an unhealthy amount of hours creating the *Viva Elvis* show with barely enough compensation to pay for her expenses.

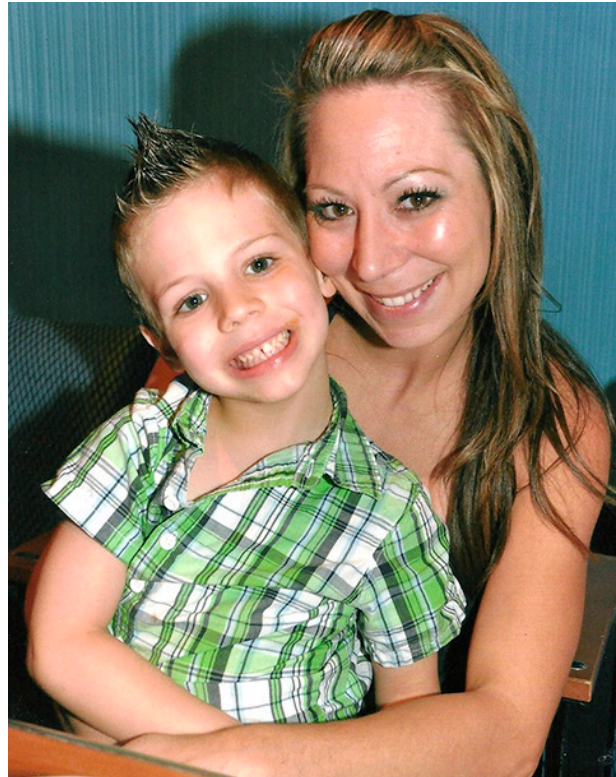
"The hours were brutal. I didn't join a show that was already running. It was a brand new show, which made it tougher," Stauffer said.

"We were working 16-hour days six days a week. And I remember thinking, 'What have I done? I don't ever get to see my son.' The money was horrible, too. Justin was at MGM daycare, and I was only making \$2,000 a month. Daycare was \$1,200 and rent was \$750, so what did that leave me with? \$50 to live off of?" she laughed at the memory.

Stauffer was 30 years old when she was performing gymnastics tricks in *Viva Elvis*, putting her body through movements she hadn't done since she was 15 years old.

During the creation phase—when the show isn't yet generating revenue from ticket sales—salaries are smaller. Once a show is up and running, performers' salaries—which are negotiated individually—improve significantly, and many earn close to six figures. Schedules become less hectic at this point, as well. When *Viva Elvis* was running, Stauffer found herself working a more reasonable five days on with two days off.

As she gained experience, Stauffer began to notice a trend. While North American athletes came and went, usually lasting one to three years before moving on to something else, international athletes were more resilient and even embraced the grueling lifestyle in Cirque du Soleil.



Courtesy of Tammy Stauffer

Stauffer ultimately left the circus to avoid having to raise her son in Sin City.

"The Belarusians, the Romanians, the Russians, Chinese and Brazilians, they wanted to stay in the United States. Many of them don't have anything to go back to. They're almost rich working in Cirque compared to what their parents make back home. And they send all their money home to their families," Stauffer said.

She noted that some international athletes, such as Lima, will craft careers of a decade or more.

One of the reasons Lima believes international acrobats tend to have longer careers is because Cirque helps them with their living and working visas. He was able to apply for U.S. citizenship because he has a "special ability," and today he is an American citizen.

North American athletes, on the other hand, have a shorter self-created shelf life, so to speak. Stauffer believes part of the reason for their shorter circus careers is because of how hard the training is on the body.

On top of rehearsals and 10 shows per week—as well as regular weekly training sessions on her apparatus—Stauffer

also made time for physiotherapy, massage, Pilates and yoga sessions. Her body felt like it was in a constant state of working overtime.

"All of the international athletes (though), they're just so willing to put up with any ache, any pain," she said.

Stauffer was 30 years old when she was performing gymnastics tricks in *Viva Elvis*, putting her body through movements she hadn't done since she was 15 years old. A 30-year-old is considered a grandmother of the sport of gymnastics; Stauffer could tell her body wasn't happy with her.

And the equipment she was performing on wasn't helping her case.

"We ripped like you wouldn't believe because we were using metal high bars," Stauffer said.

Generally, female gymnasts swing on the uneven bars, which are made of wood. The metal bars they use in Cirque have less give to them, which can rip hands to shreds. Night after night, show after show, Stauffer taped up and hit the bars with raw, ripped hands.

"And the mats we landed on weren't like crash mats we used in (gymnastics). They were hard. It was like dismounting and landing on a hardwood floor And doing bars under spotlights made it tougher too They're very bright, and you can lose your timing," Stauffer said.



Courtesy of Tammy Stauffer

Stauffer (left) enjoyed her time in Cirque but knew when it was time to retire.

"There were a lot of torn shoulders. A lot of injuries," she added.

In the case of injuries, back-up performers are always ready to substitute, and often if someone sustains a prolonged injury, a new athlete will be hired as a temp artist. Luckily, Stauffer avoided any major injuries, but her circus life was relatively short, especially compared to someone like Lima.

Stauffer believes Cirque is no different than any other sport.

"Injuries happen when you're training at that level," she said. And she's quick to point out that safety is always a priority in Cirque.

Recently, Cirque has been under the microscope after 31-year-old aerialist [Sarah Guillot-Guyard plummeted to her death](#) in June 2013 during a performance in the Cirque du Soleil show *Ka* at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas.

It was later determined that Guillot-Guyard's wire rope came off its pulley and scraped against a sharp edge until it eventually broke. An investigation into the tragedy resulted in Nevada's Occupational Safety and Health Administration citing Cirque du Soleil for failing to train Guillot-Guyard properly, and for failing to protect other performers, as well. Cirque du Soleil was hit with \$25,000 in fines, and MGM Grand was fined \$7,000 for safety shortcomings. Both Cirque and MGM Grand told the Associated Press they plan to appeal the fines.

Cirque has had other injuries over the years, and a performer was hurt after falling from the Wheel of Death in an early November 2013 performance of *Zarkana*, but Stauffer recalls Cirque was persistently committed to safety.

"Harnesses were always double-checked. Triple-checked. Safety was always a huge priority, and what happened to Sarah was a freak accident," Stauffer said.

"I never felt unsafe performing," she added.

Safety concerns were certainly not why Stauffer left the company. The effects of years of training and performing told her body it was time to call it quits. Not only that, but her son was also about to start kindergarten, and the last place she wanted to raise a child was in Las Vegas. So Stauffer returned home to Canada with the memory of Cirque du Soleil—both the great times and the challenging ones—never far from her mind.

She doesn't have any regrets about her time in Cirque. She achieved her goal of getting closure to her gymnastics career, and she had a great experience in the process. But

it still amazes her how so many international athletes—people like her friend Lima—are able to continue putting their bodies and minds through the circus, night after night, weeks after week, year after year.

"I have so much respect for Wellington He's amazing," she said.

The Magic of *Michael Jackson One*

Close to 1,800 people fill the *Michael Jackson One* theater for a late Wednesday-night show.

It's the last night of performances for two days. The production rests on Thursdays and Fridays and resumes on Saturday night. The lights go down and music starts playing.

For two hours, the action doesn't stop. From impressive tumblers to high-flying trampolinists, rope climbers who effortlessly scale silk ropes, pole acrobats with impossible-to-believe strength, and a contortionist dressed as Michael Jackson, the show masterfully obscures the fact that you're watching human beings.

The talented athletes combine with the intricate costumes, colorful lights, dramatic music and beautiful choreography, and each moment is more breathtaking than the last in a show where no performance detail is forgotten.

Twenty minutes into the show, Lima makes his debut. He jumps off a platform and drops 25 feet onto a trampoline, which springs him high into the sky. His athleticism and precision save him from disaster, as he flips and twists and miraculously manages to reach into the air and grab a small bar.

He hangs from the bar with one hand for a moment or two before releasing himself, dropping back to the trampoline, landing on his back, and rebounding 25 feet in the air, carrying on with focus and grace.

Before you know it, other trampolinists join Lima mid-air, flipping and twisting, dropping and rebounding in perfect timing. The crowd oohs and ahhs with both appreciation and anxiety as one slightly mistimed jump or bounce could result in a mid-air collision.

But they don't collide. Like clockwork, the trampoline specialists continue their risky routine, doing tricks that appear miraculous to the audience.

Lima feels no anxiety. When he first started learning the Tramp Wall, it was a challenge, but he has learned to be



Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil



Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil

***Michael Jackson One* pays tribute to the King of Pop through music, dance and acrobatics.**

Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil



In the cutthroat Las Vegas market, a show can't be good. It has to be outstanding or it's not going to last.

patient, one of the keys to his performance. That said, this show has presented Lima with new challenges, even after more than a decade in the business. In the other shows, the trampoline was 7 by 14 feet, but in *Michael Jackson One*, it's only 6 by 12 feet, meaning Lima has to be even more precise.

But after spending five months putting this performance together with the other nine members of his crew, he

**The movements look so easy,
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has nothing but faith in the team's ability. And Lima isn't showing any ill effects from the motorcycle accident earlier in the day. If he's suffering, he hides it well. The show must go on.

An hour into the performance, the crowd grows almost immune to the complexity of the acrobatic performances. The movements look so easy, so natural, so much like flowing water it's as if nature intended bodies to move this way. Just before the audience starts taking the talent for granted, the show is over.

People file out quickly and immediately move on to their next Las Vegas adventure. Some can immediately be found with a drink in hand, others hit the casino or place a bet on the next day's baseball game, while others drop close to \$1,000 at the Gordon Ramsay-inspired steakhouse just outside the theater.

But for Lima, it's time to recover from a long week of work. After the performance, exhausted, sore athletes file out of the Mandalay Bay, many of them icing one body part or another.

Lima takes a long, hot shower like he does after every show, and at the very end he blasts the cold water to refresh himself.

He has two days off, and then it all begins again.

Magic in Every Show

For most of the performers in *Michael Jackson One*, Wednesday is their Friday.

"On Wednesday, lots of people say, 'Yeah, it's finally Friday!' but it feels like Monday for me. You have to have the mindset like it's the start of the week every night. The energy has to be there every night," Lima said.

"Delivering the magic," as Lima calls it, is very important to him.

"You have to remember that people are all here for the first time," he said. "We try to always leave a message on their hearts."

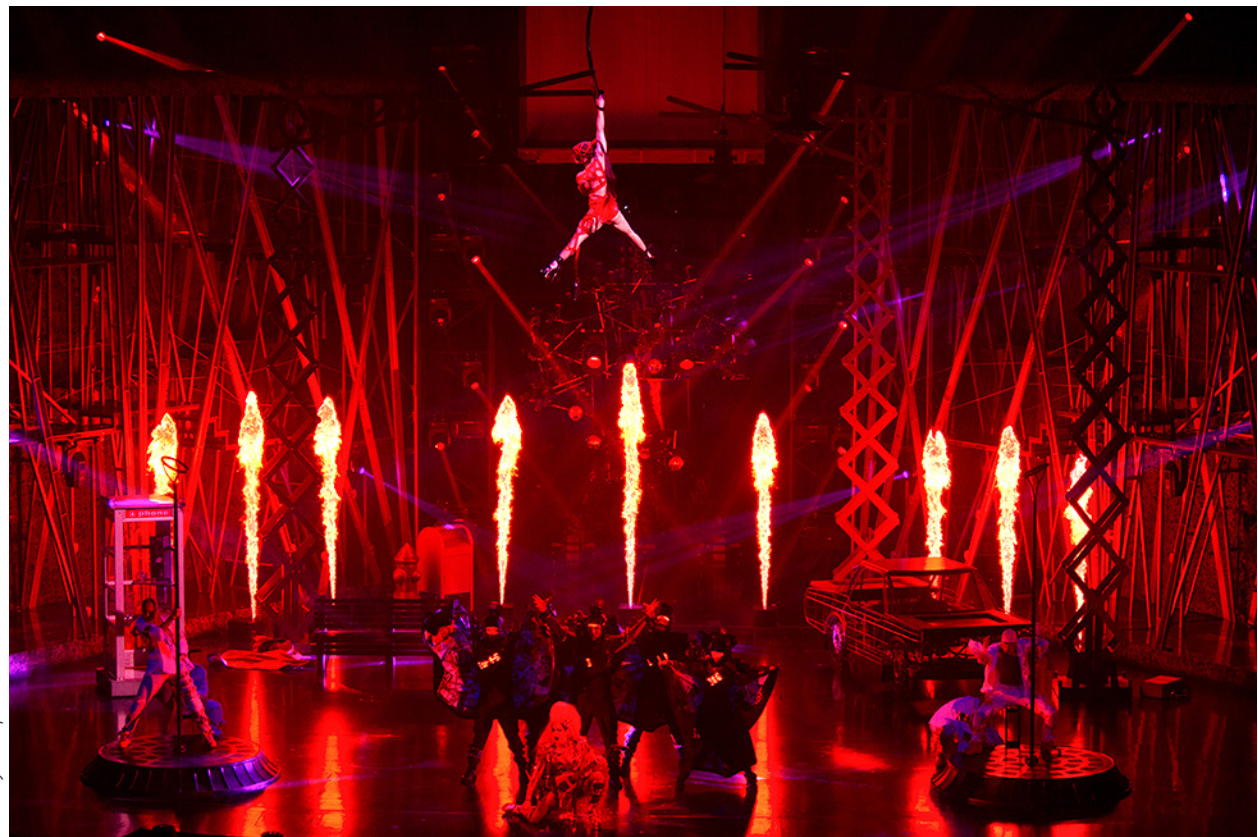
So every night, Lima finds a way to pretend like it's his first night performing, no matter how tired he is, how sore he is or how overworked his body feels.

And he will keep doing this, night after night, "as long as my body holds up," he said.

Although he does everything he can to help his performance and his recovery—from staying strong with capoeira training to taking glucosamine, doing yoga, performing proper warm-ups and cool-downs, and making regular visits to his physiotherapist—Lima admits his lifestyle is tough on his body.

"The pain is always there," he said, smiling as he speaks, as if the pain doesn't phase him. The job he has to do overrides the challenges. And most of the time, it doesn't feel like a job. And the risks? They're just a part of life, he believes.

Lima's worst injury was breaking the fibula in both legs in 2006 while warming up for a show in Malaga, Spain. The injury left him in a wheelchair for nine weeks.



Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil

For Cirque performers, this is just another day at the office.



Courtesy of Wellington Lima

Lima performs hundreds of shows a year, but the most important of all is the one that happens tonight.

"Because of my willpower to get back on the stage, and the support from the Cirque staff, I was back doing the show in five months," Lima said.

While he recognizes acrobatics carry an element of risk, he looks at it as just another part of life: "We take risks in everything we do. When we drive a car or when we eat in a restaurant—food can be poisonous."

He added: "But I like to face my fears and go after what is good And I've never been asked to do something that doesn't feel safe When I signed up, I knew what I was signing up for."

He continues to embrace the life he chose, but Lima still misses some of the simplicities of his home in Recife.

"I miss things like drinking fresh coconut juice straight from the coconut," he said. And he misses his family, who have never seen him perform in his 15 years with Cirque du Soleil. But that might change. Lima's mother is hoping to visit her son for the first time in the United States this winter.

"She doesn't really understand what I do She'll be surprised," Lima said. "She has no idea what to expect."

Lima is thrilled to show her what he does every day, excited to show her all he has accomplished in the last 15 years.

"Not many people perform for 15 years," he said proudly.

He added: "But the longer you stay, the harder it is to leave."



About the Author

*Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor. She competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver's team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.*