

Tim Matthews – Unleashed!



I was born without my left arm 32 years ago in the East Gippsland town of Orbost. I had a condition known as Exompholas, where the abdomen fails to close around the umbilical cord. In my case, the Exompholas exposed a number of organs, including my liver.

The membrane protecting my exposed organs ruptured when I was only a couple of days old, causing many complications. As a result, I spent much of my early

life at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne.

In about 30% of cases, Exompholas occurs in conjunction with other birth abnormalities. In my case, I was born with some webbed fingers and without my left arm.

Following a number of operations and skin grafts, my parents relocated to Bairnsdale. From a young age, I loved sport and

was fortunate to attend a small primary school where sport was a celebrated part of the community. As a youngster, I played various sports including football, tennis, golf and baseball. I only played football until I was 12, as my liver was not protected by my ribcage and any solid hit to it was very painful. I became mindful at an early age of the types of sports that would suit me best.

For me, growing up with one arm was never an issue. I think it is far less difficult to be born with a limb difference than it is to lose a limb later in life. Aside from playing full contact sports, having one arm didn’t stop me from doing anything that my mates could do.

Not knowing anyone else with a similar disability made it necessary for me to think outside the square. Whether it was learning how to tie my shoelaces, putting on a watch, serving in tennis or playing baseball with a glove, I was always independently determined.

Being born with only my right arm and always using the right hand side of my body resulted in a scoliosis of my spine. When I was in grade 6, I received my first back brace. I hated wearing it. I was supposed to wear it for 23 hours a day, but I despised it. I couldn’t play sport wearing it, couldn’t ride a bike with it on and had trouble sleeping in it. By the time I was 16, I had scarcely worn my brace and the specialists decided that enough was enough. I had a spinal fusion to partially correct my scoliosis. If I had my time over again, I definitely would have worn my brace. Having a spinal fusion at 16 was tough. I



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spent the following two years off the sporting field.

Following high school, I studied Outdoor Education at Bendigo University. My core subjects included rock climbing, bushwalking and skiing. They challenged me and I learned a lot about myself.

During my third year of study, I was invited to play in an amputee tennis tournament in Melbourne. I had never played sport against athletes with disabilities. This was for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I was able to play sport at a reasonable level against able-bodied participants. Secondly, as I was born without my arm I didn't think that I was eligible for disability sport. I hadn't considered myself an "amputee", but for the purposes of disability sport, I soon realised that I was eligible to compete against other people with disabilities. The tennis tournament changed my life. It was there that I met David Evans, another tennis player who suggested that I have a go at athletics. A couple of months later, I competed in the Australian Amputee Athletic Titles and did reasonably well, winning my events.

The Paralympic Head Coach for athletics suggested that the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta were a possibility for me. Ten months later, I got myself a coach, started training and transferred my studies to part time. I qualified for Atlanta in the 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay events for amputees on the track. Although I missed out on winning an

individual medal, I was fortunate to be a part of the relay team that won gold and broke the world record. Standing on the medal dais with the national anthem playing and the flag being raised in our honour was a moment I will never forget.

Following Atlanta, I moved to Melbourne to further pursue athletics. Leading up to the Sydney Paralympic Games, I was consistently running under 11 seconds for 100m. This has been the benchmark for upper limb amputee sprinters around the world.

The Sydney Paralympic Games in 2000 was an incredible experience. The Games put disability and the abilities of disabled people at the forefront of a mainstream audience. The crowds loved it, and we were finally being recognised by the public as athletes first.

Although I missed out on placing in the 100m, I was again part of the relay team that won the 4x100m. We also won the 4x400m in world record time. Australia has a great tradition in relay events, and they are fantastic for team morale. I feel fortunate to have been part of the Australian athletics team that won 32 gold medals.

Following Sydney, I set my sights on Athens, aiming to win my key event, the 100m. Sadly, I tore my hamstring in the heat and instantly knew that my Games were over. Although it was disappointing, it's easy to keep

things in perspective at an event such the Paralympic Games. Leaving the stadium with athletes of all abilities, I am reminded of the amazing opportunities I have had. Hopefully a fourth Games in Beijing next year will provide a unique experience, as every Games thus far have done.

The 12 years of my sporting career with the Victorian Institute of Sport have enabled me to travel to 28 countries around the world. I have met some truly inspirational people, some of the best athletes in the world, Prime Ministers and even the Queen. I feel privileged for the experiences I've had. I have also had the good fortune to room with my best mate, best man at my wedding late last year and co-patron of Limbs4Life, Don Elgin, at competitions all over the world. We have loved every minute of it. I'm now employed by the Australian Paralympic Committee, managing the Toyota Paralympic Talent Search Program that aims to identify and assist the Paralympic stars of tomorrow.

A big well done and congratulations to both Mel and Jacinta for their work in getting Limbs4Life off the ground and assisting amputees in the community. I am delighted to be on board!

Life is to be lived, so enjoy...

Tim Matthews

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