

# PINNACLE

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FRONT COVER: (LEFT TO RIGHT) LIZ WATSON, DANIELLE SCOTT, LEON SEJLANOVIC, SHAE GRAHAM, MARIA STRONG, EMILY PETRICOLA, AHMED KELLY, JEMIMA MONTAG, CAITLIN PARKER, STEPH CATLEY.  
 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: KATE PAUL-DREVENSEK, AMY MCMAHON, ASHLEY GILLESPIE, CAMILLA BLANDS, DOM HOOK, DAN SIMONS AND STEPHEN RIELLY



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# FROM THE CEO

ANNE MARIE HARRISON  
 CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



The consolidation throughout the year of our 'New Beginnings', enabled through a significant increase in State Government funding, has seen huge organisational growth in the number of athletes being supported and our staff expertise to wrap around them.

In our refurbished facility or home, as many athletes refer to it, the Victorian Institute of Sport is now nurturing over 450 scholarship holders competing across 48 sports.

All of this has been achieved with our ongoing focus on 'success in sport and life' and support of the 2032+ high performance strategy 'win well' pledge. So, throughout this magazine you will see many fine examples of the lives of our athletes and staff away from their sport training and competition environments.

Our community programs continue to support the 'Active Victoria' strategy, our partnership with School Sport Victoria and the Department of Education Advancement series and we returned to our Open Day welcoming over 1000 attendees.

Our athletes continue to be the stars, exemplified by the fact that we had 36 nominations for the Award of Excellence with each of those representing a podium or significant performance at a world event and culminating in a celebration of these achievements.

In 2024 we turn our dual focus to the runway to Paris with athletes qualifying and preparing for the Olympic and Paralympic Games and our pathway athletes in the Emerging and Developing categories continuing their journey to maximise their talent for Milan-Cortina, LA and Brisbane.





LEON SEJLANOVIC

# TAEKWONDO'S 'LEON' KING

World Championships bronze medallist and Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) scholarship holder, Leon Sejlanovic, was just three-years old when he discovered Taekwondo.



He was at his local YMCA with his father, Kemal, and sister, Vanja, when they spotted a Taekwondo class taking place in one of the halls at the centre.

"It was luck," Leon says.

"My Dad thought maybe we should look at it somewhere and get involved. Because I was three, he started doing it with me as well. So, I guess that's how it started, and I never looked back."

Over the next decade, Leon honed his skills as his passion for martial arts and combat sport deepened.

As a teenager, he was awarded a scholarship to Maribyrnong Sports Academy (MSA) in Melbourne's west, where he had the opportunity to train as a high-performance athlete in Taekwondo.

He went on to train as a junior athlete at Notorious Martial Arts, before joining the Combat Institute of Australia's National Performance Centre program in 2022.

A year earlier, he had accepted a VIS Future Talent scholarship which allowed him to train with a holistic team of experts at the VIS and Combat AUS, including physiotherapists, physical preparation coaches, nutritionists, and performance lifestyle advisers.

This combination of early good fortune, dedication, talent, discipline and support resulted in Leon, then 20 years of age, winning a bronze medal at the 2023 World Senior Taekwondo Championships in Baku, Azerbaijan.

The medal was a breakthrough moment, for Leon and Australian Taekwondo. It was the first medal won by an Australian at World Championship level in 10 years and the first by a male in almost a quarter of a century.

Recognition followed. By the year's end, Leon had shared the VIS 2XU Rising



Star award with Hockeyroo Amy Lawton and been named by Victoria University, where he is completing an exercise science degree, its Athlete of the Year.

Dean Ritchie, former Lead Physical Preparation Coach of combat sports at the VIS, was in Leon's support team in Baku, having worked with him in the lead up to the World Championships.

"The integration of the partnership with Combat AUS and the VIS is really important. The technical coaches are in every single preparation session, which drives athlete engagement," Ritchie says.

"Leon's success was no surprise given his growing appetite for hard work and the dedication he shows toward both his technical and physical training. He beat some of the best athletes in the world in the lead up to his medal.

"It has been immensely rewarding to see Leon grow as an athlete and a person. He is a quiet worker and achiever, but he has had drastic growth as an athlete in the last

18 months, actively shifting his performance habits.

"He is building technically but the hard work is feeding his confidence and enabling him to ask more of himself. His horizons have lifted."

Leon now has his sights set on qualifying for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

VIS physiotherapist, Amber Bennett, has also been working with Leon for the past 18 months. In Taekwondo, like all combat sports, injury prevention and management is a focus.

Leon competed in 10 countries in 2023 and often in back-to-back-back situations in Europe and Asia where many of his competitors are closer to home and their creature comforts. It is too costly for Leon, indeed most athletes from Australia often competing regularly in the northern hemisphere, to fly in and out for tournaments so he must manage punishing stints of competition and recovery.

"In combat sports, it's important to offset the overuse injuries through adjusting

the physical preparation in the gym, while staying on top of the range of trauma-based injuries that happen routinely with sparring," Bennett says.

"Leon has had so much personal growth as an athlete since I started with the Taekwondo program. It will be great to see where he is at in the next 12 months into Paris 2024, but also in the years leading into LA 2028.

"He is a great role model for the younger athletes he coaches, with a light-hearted approach, team player mentality and a goofball laugh you can ID from a mile away."

Leon says martial arts teach discipline, integrity and good values and morals.

"I like the fact there's not really any shortcuts with the sport," Leon says.

"I also think that the characteristics that someone has to have to achieve things in this sport, they translate really well to the outside world. You have to work hard and get stuff done."

Ritchie agrees.

"Combat sports teach you a huge amount of respect, and to be tough and resilient. Resilience and mental toughness are key aspects of the sport. I don't think you can be successful without those traits. People break thumbs and fingers, but they continue on and keep going."

The coaches at the VIS and Combat AUS, and Kemal, are Leon's main sources of inspiration.

"I know how much Dad sacrifices for me to be able to travel the world and to try and achieve the things I want to achieve," Leon says.

"The coaches are also super supportive and go above and beyond to help us. It's a great feeling to feel supported and that whatever you need to improve your performance is there."



## MARIBYRNONG SPORTS ACADEMY

### PRIDE IN PERFORMANCE

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[SPORTSACADEMY.MARIBSC.VIC.EDU.AU](https://sportsacademy.maribsc.vic.edu.au)



## AOE WINNERS

# A NIGHT WHEN OUR NETBALLERS SHONE LIKE DIAMONDS IN THE SKY

Australian netballers Liz Watson, Jo Weston and Kiera Austin joined the Victorian Institute of Sport honour roll in late November when they won the prestigious VIS Award of Excellence.

Joining previous winners such as Cathy Freeman, Dylan Alcott, Lydia Lassila, Mack Horton, Cadel Evans and 2022 recipient Jemima Montag, the trio were recognised with the 2023 Award of Excellence for their multiple international triumphs with the national team, the Diamonds.

The Award of Excellence recognises the most outstanding achievement in high performance sport by a VIS athlete.

Watson, Weston and Austin shared in a Quad Series victory in January, won the World Cup in August and followed that with success over New Zealand in the Constellation Cup in October. In all, the Diamonds won 16 of 19 Tests in the year and claimed all of netball's major trophies.

Watson captained the Diamonds throughout and Austin was voted MVP of the World Cup final in which the Australian team routed England by 16 goals after losing to the Roses earlier in the tournament.

"It's been a massive two years for us," Watson said with her Award of Excellence Trophy in one hand and her other hand on the shoulder of Weston.

"The World Cup was the last thing that we really wanted to achieve with this group."

Weston said there was an element of redemption in the World Cup triumph which fuelled the year.

"Liz and I were both there four years ago when we lost the World Cup in Liverpool by one goal," Weston recalled.

"There were lots of tears of devastation then. There were tears of elation, (and) a little bit of relief in that last quarter (of the 2023 final).

Austin, the junior of the trio who looks to have many years of international netball in

front of her, spoke to the AOE audience not about the results the Diamonds achieved but the team environment she believes was largely responsible for them.

"I felt like I belonged from day one where usually it takes a couple of years of figuring out and finding your feet, where there's a kind of hierarchical battle going on," Austin reflected.

"I think the ingredient is that we're all just really good friends. It sounds so cliched but a lot of my best friends in life are netballers. It makes it easier when you turn up and you get to be your best every day."

The trio were among five finalists for the 2023 Award of Excellence, with world champion Para-cyclist, Emily Petricola, and world champion wheelchair rugby player, Shae Graham, the other nominees.

Graham, the first woman to represent Australia in wheelchair rugby where teams can be mixed, was a member of the 'Steelers' who defeated Canada in the final of the Wheelchair Rugby World Cup in October.

Petricola won gold at this year's UCI World Cycling Championships as part of her preparation for the 2024 Paralympic Games in Paris, a success which followed a three-gold medal effort at the 2022 Para Cycling World Championships.

The Award of Excellence was presented at The Glasshouse in Melbourne's Olympic Park precinct on November 23.

The evening also saw the VIS honour a number of its other athletes, among them Petricola who won the VIS Para Athlete Award.

Austin won twice on the night, being the recipient of the Open Universities Australia Performance Lifestyle Award,

which recognises excellence from an athlete in their studies, career ambitions, and/or work setting whilst pursuing their high-performance sporting career.

Austin completed a Bachelor of Medical Science degree in 2023 and is hoping to work in a medical field – possibly reproductive health – in the future.

Leon Sejanovic, who won a breakthrough bronze medal at the Taekwondo World Championships, and Amy Lawton who is a star member of the Hockeyroos, shared the 2XU Rising Star Award. Former Hockeyroo goalkeeper and current VIS Performance Lifestyle Adviser, Rachael Lynch, won the Sarah Tait Spirit Award.

The Frank Pyke Achievement Award, presented to an athlete who enjoyed a successful sporting career, made a significant contribution to the VIS and their sport and who has built a successful post-athletic career, was awarded to aerial skier Lydia Lassila.

Lassila, a five-time Winter Olympian, gold medallist in Vancouver in 2010 and Award of Excellence winner in 2010, was a VIS scholarship holder for 16 years and is the founder and director of BodyICE.



Watch AOE highlights here



IMAGES: (TOP ROW) EMILY PETRICOLA OAM, RACHAEL LYNCH, KIERA AUSTIN, LIZ WATSON, JO WESTON AND LEON SEJANOVIC (MIDDLE ROW) KIERA AUSTIN, LIZ WATSON AND JO WESTON. MR JOHN BERGER MP AND EMILY PETRICOLA OAM. (BOTTOM) RACHAEL LYNCH



TESS MADGEN

# TESS MADGEN'S HOOP DREAM ISN'T OVER

The Victorian Institute of Sport played an integral part in Tess Madgen's return to the court after injury threatened to end her career. The Opal's captain now has her sights firmly on leading the team to the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris.



Madgen was sidelined for all but the first game of the 2022/23 WNBL season due to a knee injury sustained prior to the 2022 World Cup.

She was almost ready to call time on her career, questioning if she could return to the playing standard she expected of herself with the ongoing pain of her injury.

"I was honestly ready to retire from basketball. I was 70% ready, just because I couldn't really see a light coming out of the tunnel from my injury," Madgen says.

Fortunately, with the assistance of Basketball Australia and her Opals physiotherapist, Madgen sought the advice of the VIS and started working with VIS Physiotherapy Manager, Steve Hawkins, Physical Preparation Coach, Nathan Lee and Performance Psychologist,

Dean Cooper, in January.

"I was excited and motivated to work with Tess, I'd heard great things from Opals staff about her training ethic and commitment to working hard," says Lee.

At the beginning of her recovery, it was common for Madgen to be at the VIS six days a week, with some sessions spanning between two to three hours.

A key focus in her rehab was increasing muscle bulk around the injury to help absorb and tolerate the forces going through her body when jumping, dodging and cutting in basketball. Lee ensured there was plenty of work strengthening the quad on her injured leg, but throughout her whole body as well.

"I was really impressed with Tess's ability to consistently execute the prescribed plans to improve her physical qualities around her injury. She was meticulous. Not only did she execute the plans, but she conducted them perfectly which contributed to getting her back on court sooner," Lee said.

Madgen said that the 2023 FIBA Women's Asia Cup was never the goal when starting her recovery with the VIS. Initially with sights on the upcoming Paris 2024 Olympic Games, she worked with Lee on structuring her rehab to prepare her for the 2023/24 WNBL season which started in November, hopefully putting her in good stead for Opals team selection next year.

"I could see the rewards in my body every day after coming in here and working with Nathan and Steve," she said.

Under the guidance of Lee and Hawkins, Madgen's knee progressed quicker than anticipated, allowing the 2023 FIBA Women's Asia Cup to become a possibility. She pays credit to Steve and Nathan's expertise and patience when reflecting on how smoothly her rehab went.

"Once I got to the VIS I felt super in control, all I had to do was come in and worry about lifting weights and everything else was completely taken care of. This was a huge relief for me mentally," she said.

Madgen admits being an injured athlete can be a selfish time, having to make sacrifices when deciding what is best for her recovery. Being the captain of the Opals was a blessing for her during this time, helping her to see the bigger picture and consider the welfare of her teammates and their needs.

She worked closely with Cooper every week leading into the tournament to ensure she felt confident in herself and her captaincy, to better prepare her mindset and leadership for the Asia Cup.

"It was the highlight of my week seeing Dean and coming out feeling super empowered and ready to be a better person," she said.

Madgen had a successful Asia Cup campaign, bringing home the bronze medal with her teammates and earning player of the match against New Zealand with 14 points and five assists. This was a significant placing for the Opals as the Asia Cup also doubled as qualifying for next year's Olympic Qualifying Tournaments, with the top four finishers securing their tickets to Paris 2024.

Madgen said that each injury has allowed her to refocus on what she really wants, reminding her to not take playing for granted and to make the most of her remaining playing career. Madgen is now striving to win another WNBL championship and play in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games before deciding to retire on her own terms.

"I feel like I'm physically and mentally able to do that now, whereas before I started at the VIS it was definitely off the cards for me," she said.

Madgen signed with Sydney Flames for the 2023/24 WNBL and decided to continue to work with Lee while in Sydney.

"I'm really grateful for the VIS and all the people who have supported me to get back on court. They've shown me that they'll always be there for me, to reach out at any time."

Lee feels proud of what Tess has been able to achieve, being much stronger now than when she first came to the VIS. As support staff, he strives to get athletes back to a position where they can perform.

"She has done all the hard work and has continued to impress me over the time we've worked together. I have no doubt she will continue chasing her dreams," Lee said.



Watch our interview with Madgen and Lee here



MELISSA TAPPER

# TRAILBLAZING TAPPER

**On December 3, the Victorian Institute of Sport honoured the International Day of People with Disability (IDPwD).**

The VIS has a lengthy and proud history of supporting para athletes dating back to the very first days of its existence in 1990. Notable VIS para athletes include Dylan Alcott OAM (wheelchair basketball and tennis), Don Elgin and Kelly Cartwright (para-athletics) and Emily Petricola (para-cycling).

IDPwD Day – sanctioned by the United Nations – exists to increase public awareness, understanding and acceptance of people with disability but, more than this, to celebrate their achievements and the positive contribution their example often makes.

Many of the para athletes at the VIS epitomise the philosophy by which the VIS is guided; to “succeed in sport and life”.

None more so than VIS stalwart, Melissa “Milly” Tapper.

Milly rewrote history books when she played table tennis for Australia at the Rio 2016 Olympics and Paralympics.

She did the same in Tokyo, a unique achievement that may just be a record that never tumbles.

Hailing from Hamilton in regional Victoria, she was born on March 1, 1990 – a life giving moment that didn’t go to plan.

“I weighed 11 pound two ounces when I was born, and I got stuck. I was pulled out by my right arm, and that tore the nerves between my neck and my shoulder,” Tapper explains.

Milly suffered a brachial plexus injury which resulted in Erb’s Palsy, a paralysis of the arm caused by injury to the upper group of the arm’s main nerves.

Essentially it made her right arm a dead weight.

At four months old, she had an operation to improve her mobility where surgeons took nerves from her lower legs and attached them to the torn ones in her shoulder.

“After the operation I gained about 30 per cent use, but I had to come up with my

own way of doing most of the things that require both arms.”

Despite her injury and its consequences, she was never treated differently nor viewed herself as having a disability.

“There were no special snowflakes in our house, and I was treated the same as my siblings and expected to do house chores just the same.”

When she was eight, her parents bought a table tennis table for them at their holiday house to play and although she was initially hopeless, and her brother and sister didn’t want to play with her she stuck at it and had fun trying.

“That enjoyment and love for it is what kept me coming back and eventually, I guess, I got alright at it.”

Now 33 years of age, Milly is seeking to reach her third Olympics and fourth Paralympic Games in Paris next year.

No other athlete in Australian sport has achieved the Olympic/Paralympic double, which gives her a unique viewpoint of the world’s greatest sporting event but it’s clear that the Paralympics, and the Paralympic community, holds a special place in her heart.

“I think the greatest thing about Paralympic sport is it’s completely raw - what you see is the full athlete just purely going out there wanting to be the best that they can be.”

“You’re in a stadium full of athletes that have a disability, but you don’t see anybody’s disability rather just their ability.”

Her refusal to look at any opponent differently, regardless of whether they are able-bodied or competing with an impairment is one thing that has been consistent across her athletic career.

“Whether it’s para or able-bodied, I go in with the same approach - no player is para or able-bodied in my head.”

Milly’s route to Paris will be a very difficult one. Which is how it should be, right?

“Qualifying for an Olympic and Paralympic Games is not an easy thing to do. I’ve got really strong teammates now, including World No. 1 Qian Yang, and with changes in qualification rules, it’s going to be tough”.

The likelihood is she will need to win world qualification events for both Games in May 2024 against all the other players who haven’t yet qualified.

As much as she wants to gain selection, she knows she’ll be okay if she doesn’t.

“Overall, when I look back over my career, I’ve just loved it. You always want one more tournament, one more medal, but I’m stoked with what I’ve achieved.”

Tapper’s peace with her success to date, as well having other parts of her life “happening”, has given her a refreshed outlook and new foci.

In 2022, the VIS scholarship holder was contacted by a local Hamilton man who wanted to raise funds for an accessible playground in the town.

Initially she was unsure about how she could assist, until one night whilst on camp at the AIS in Canberra she was struck by a business idea.

The details flooded from her mind into a midnight text message to her husband, Simon, and from that point she was all consumed by her new venture.

“I had an addiction to it, which reminded me of when I first started playing table tennis. It was all I was thinking about. I lent on people in my network and little pieces began to fall into place.”

After 11 months of hard work, favours and upskilling via Youtube and Google, Southwest Society (SWS) was born - a new kind of society all about inclusion.

South West Society is a streetwear brand that not only “looks good but does good” for the environment and the community.



MELISSA TAPPER

“At SWS, we believe that fashion should not only be stylish but also sustainable.”

SWS uses eco-friendly materials in their products and packaging and source their materials from ethical and sustainable suppliers. They are also deeply committed to giving back to the community.

“We partner with local charities and organisations to support causes that are important to us and our customers.”

SWS is currently working with Better Together Hamilton, to raise funds for accessible play equipment for all abilities in the Greater Hamilton community and help educate around disability inclusion.

“I think the most fundamental thing for a kid is to be able to play – particularly with

another kid, side by side, whether they have a disability or not. For me growing up, the element of learning to play and have fun is what helped me get into sport.”

A percentage of every SWS sale goes towards Better Together’s mission.

“I get very excited when my phone buzzes and lets me know that an order has gone through. I love the thrill of someone purchasing something, it makes me incredibly happy that someone is supporting it.”

Milly is clearly enjoying this stage of her dual careers.

“The SWS journey so far has been great fun but challenging, and I continue to really enjoy working part-time in the people advisory team at Ernst & Young - both are

still quite new to me, and I just want to keep learning and do the best I can.”

“I guess now when I train and compete, I’m even more grateful for it.”

The trailblazing Tapper has never dwelt on the physical challenges she has faced, which is why she is reluctant to see herself as an athlete others can look up to.

“But if I am able to influence people and inspire people to push themselves to achieve more than what they thought they could then that’s just a bonus.”

Despite being hesitant to describe herself as a role model, that is what she has become.

Find out more about South West Society here: [www.southwestsociety.com.au](http://www.southwestsociety.com.au)



CAROL COOKE AM

# CHANGING THE GAME

**In early October, the Victorian Minister for Community Sport, Ros Spence, spoke of her determination to raise the number of women employed in sports organisations in positions of authority. Women hired and supported as leaders.**

Announcing the 70 recipients of the 2023-24 Change Our Game Professional Development Scholarships, Spence said: “We are driving gender equality in sport, and to achieve this, we need more women in leadership roles. This program supports women in their pathway to leadership, no matter what career stage they are in.”

Carol Cooke AM PLY, a triple Paralympian and nine-time world champion cyclist, is an ambassador for the Change Our Game initiative which offers support to women across the spectrum of sports administration, from those starting their careers to aspiring chief executives.

The grants provide recipients with professional development, sports governance education and access to mentors and career coaches to help develop career pathway and skills.

As a distinguished and long-time Victorian Institute of Sport athlete Cooke understands the ambition. She has seen it brought to life at the VIS where, for example, the board is chaired by Nataly Matijevic, Anne Marie Harrison has been chief executive for 17 years and 69 of the 120 permanent employees are female.

The VIS director of Performance Health Services, the Innovation and Research Project Manager and two of the four General Managers of High Performance, among the most senior positions in the state's peak high-performance centre, are female.

Two female coaches dedicated to the development of future, or Gen32, coaches are in place and across a diverse range of sports, from archery to sailing, a further seven coaches are female.

The breakdown is not a contrivance. Professional excellence is a pre-requisite in the competitive world of high-performance sport and many of the best sports professionals in the country aspire to work at the VIS.

Nonetheless, the presence of so many highly regarded female VIS leaders and senior staff achieves more than outstanding results.

According to Cooke, a former swimmer who turned to Para cycling after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, the VIS environment is unmistakably performance driven but makes real for women a career in sport and serves a broader purpose.

“It is so important to have women, able bodied or disabled, in roles of leadership because gender equality is a fundamental human right,” Cooke says.



“Having women in leadership roles in sports is a crucial step towards achieving equity and gender equality, not just in the sports world but in society as a whole. It sends a powerful message that women are just as capable as men in leadership and decision-making positions.

“Having women in sports leadership roles ensures that the diverse perspectives, experiences, and voices of women are considered, promoting inclusivity and making decisions that cater to a wider range of needs and interests.

“I am very proud to be part of the VIS family where we definitely show that female leadership is working extremely well.”

# OPENING THE DOORS

**The Victorian Institute of Sport is the home of high-performance sport in the state.**

Many of the best athletes to come out of Victoria in the 33 years since the VIS was founded – think Cathy Freeman, Cadel Evans, Alisa Camplin, Leisel Jones and Dylan Alcott – flourished in the care of their ‘sporting home’.

But developing and nurturing elite talent, while certainly a primary function, is not the only role the VIS plays.

Something like 22,000 schoolchildren each year either visit the VIS or are visited at their schools by VIS athletes, to hear stories of success, failure, redemption, persistence and dedication or to discover how dizzyingly high Olympic and Paralympic standards of performance really are.

With research telling us that most sports followers become enthusiasts before the age of 14, and those who start engaging in sports at an early age are more likely to exercise and participate in social groups, it is a critical return on the state's investment in the VIS.

It is also why the return of the VIS Open Day in September, after a COVID-enforced hiatus, was significant. More 1000 members of the public were granted the rare opportunity to tour the VIS' upgraded facilities and gain an insight into the lives of the institute's elite athletes and their support staff.

With Paris 2024 looming, athletes and staff took the time to share information about their preparations for the Olympics and Paralympics through a range of demonstrations, activities and panel discussions.

These included interactive sports skills and drill demonstrations with VIS athletes, cooking and nutrition classes with VIS dieticians, recovery classes with VIS strength and conditioning coaches, as well as mental preparation and performance classes with VIS sports psychologists.

Athlete discussion panels proved particularly popular and gave attendees direct insight into the professional careers of current VIS athletes; netball world champion, Liz Watson, Paralympian cyclist Alistair Donohoe, and former Paralympic athletics champion, Kelly Cartwright.

Fan favourites included wheelchair basketball, where attendees could try their luck at a game of 3-on-3, as well as long-range target practice with VIS archers. Free 20-minute workout classes run by VIS official apparel partner, 2XU, were also a hit.

“It's been really cool to share the VIS with the community,” said Donohoe, an Open Day ambassador..

“This place is my second home so it's nice to show off the facilities and the incredible support staff who help us achieve our goals. It was great to see so many kids out here trying new sports, and hopefully we see some of them back here in the future as VIS athlete scholarship holders.”

Attendees were also able to participate in activities and expos run by fellow sporting bodies such as Rowing Victoria, Paralympics Australia, Sport4All and the Australian Sports Commission, plus many more. Athletic retailer, The Athlete's Foot, offered foot scans and free giveaways for kids.

VIS official partners, Open Universities Australia and the Maribyrnong Sports Academy, were also on hand to provide information about their respective educational courses and athletics programs.

There is always an eye on the present at the VIS. High performance excellence requires a focus on the now. But there is also a sense that by encouraging and inspiring children to play sport or, at least, keep active tomorrow is also being considered.



## 2XU

PREPARE. PERFORM. RECOVER.





EMILY HAMILTON-SMITH

# OVERCOMING THE HARSHTEST CRITIC: YOURSELF

You have talent and others see it in you.

You have ambition, a trait fostered in you by those who know it to be a prerequisite for sporting success.

Soon enough representative squads replace your local teams and the doors to elite sporting programs open for you.

A dream, your sporting dream, is coming true.

But what if all of the talent and encouragement and first-rate coaching and fun of junior success leaves you wondering if you, YOU, are worthy of the investment and expectation?

Victorian Institute of Sport athlete, Emily Hamilton-Smith, has an answer to the question.

Hamilton-Smith, 21, is a member of the Jillaroos, the Australian under 21 hockey squad that is currently contesting the Hockey Junior World Cup in Chile. She has won an under 21 national championship with Victoria and at home plays at the highest domestic level with Hockey Club Melbourne. She is on familiar terms with success.

And yet “crippling self-doubt and zero self-belief” – issues counterintuitively common for many elite athletes – have shadowed her path.

The talented defender from Mt Eliza on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsular is open about this reality and the strategies she employs not only to cope but to thrive as an aspiring Hockeyroo.

“I’ve been horrible with my self-talk,” Hamilton-Smith admits.

“Throughout my sporting journey so far, I’ve been my hardest critic. As a result, I’ve suffered from crippling self-doubt and at times, zero self-belief. I received my VIS scholarship in 2019, and what should have been such an exciting and rewarding time in my life, soon became really difficult.”

“The constant comparison I made with myself and other athletes was really impacting my performance and in time my enjoyment for the game. My mind would create false narratives and the smallest setback or even feedback would send me spiralling.”

“I had never felt so low about my value as a hockey player, but also as a person. I soon became aware that something had to change, and I couldn’t keep going like this. With the help of the VIS I began seeking help from a psychologist, I began vocalizing my thoughts and embracing how I felt, rather than pushing it aside.”

This process led to an understanding of preparation for Hamilton-Smith that is as much mental as physical. Speaking up to express vulnerabilities or wrestle with doubts is, to Hamilton-Smith, critical.

“Preparing is as important as competing. I’m huge at writing things down; my thoughts, feelings, goals, etc,” she says.

“Preparing myself mentally looks like speaking to our VIS psychologist Emma and checking in with coaches. Touching base and verbalizing how I am feeling allows me to gain access to tools I can use when I am away or feeling anxious and stressed.”

“I know first-hand how much speaking up and telling someone how and what you are feeling can help. Whether to a loved one, friend or professional, verbalizing the narratives and false truths you have created is critical for a healthy mind.

“The more we keep our negative thoughts on rotation in our head, the more they begin to take over and your brain starts to believe them. You cannot ever expect to perform well, or even be the best version of yourself, when you are having these types of thoughts constantly.

“I strive to be a passionate and curious person and when I’m not feeling great internally it’s almost impossible to portray that externally. I train and work my best when I’m feeling mentally healthy. I am the best daughter, partner and friend if I’m not distracted by my own unhelpful thoughts.”

In her way, Hamilton-Smith speaks to the VIS philosophy of striving for success in sport and life. That the person and the performer are inextricably linked and both must be prioritized.

“You can eat well, practice meditation, lift heavy but without being in a positive mental state, you cannot expect to perform well,” she says.

“A coach, who has and continues to have such a profound impact on my life on and off the field, told me that I am my own barrier to success. This was obviously difficult to hear but it created a world of change.

“It opened up opportunities for me to go and get the help I need so I don’t let my mind stop me from achieving my childhood dream of representing my country.

“To be able to speak with a professional in a timely manner is something that every athlete within the VIS should be so grateful for.”



LINA LEI

# A STORY OF MASTERY AND INFLUENCE IN THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

By Yuxuan Du



"The training regimen in Australia has prolonged my sports career. It is potentially something I will adhere to for my whole life," says Lina Lei, who has a special place in Australian table tennis history as the winner of the nation's first individual women's Paralympic gold medal.

Her story is one of dedication to a single sport and two countries. Lei has lived in Australia for seven years, after migrating from China, but 2023 is her 29th year as a professional table tennis athlete.

From the age of seven, to offset the frailty brought on by a partially formed right leg, Lei trained under the strict guidance of her father. Such was her progress that at the age of 13 she joined the able-bodied table tennis program of Jiangsu province.

Her career has since become the stuff of legend.

Since the 2004 Athens Paralympics, Lei has won a total of 5 gold and 3 silver Paralympic medals, including 3 gold medals

in singles competition.

At the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics, representing her new country, Lei clinched her third singles gold medal and the first for Australia in 37 years.

"It is a great honour and a source of pride for me to have captured the singles gold medal at the Tokyo Paralympics while representing Australia. I am glad to do my part to make table tennis a better place in Australia," she says.

"This is not only the reward for my efforts, but also a reflection of successful team collaboration. It's the fruit of the collective efforts of my team manager, coach, strength and conditioning instructor, nutritionist, and myself."

If the success Lei has known as an athlete has continued, life in Australia has been very different to her existence in China where she was a full-time professional athlete.

In Melbourne, Lei has had to juggle competition and the life of an athlete with

the need to work, a balance found with the help of the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) where Lei is a scholarship holder.

Typically, she dedicates two days a week to training at the VIS, with each session focusing on lower body and full-body strength training exercises, including leg presses, Smith Machine workouts, medicine ball exercises and jumps.

In addition to this, she embarks on four aerobic training sessions weekly, which involve swimming and gym exercises using a stair-climbing machine. When large scale competitions are on the horizon, she reduces her aerobic workouts, shifting her focus towards gym training and increasing her table tennis practice sessions to up to five per week.

"The move from China to Australia was largely about a transformation in the training approach," she says.

A more regimented training program in China has been replaced by the luxury of being able to listen to her body, train when it suits her best and for as long as she cares to.

This year has been Lei's second as co-captain of the national Para table tennis team. In this role she is not only competing but nurturing her team-mates, using her vast experience and exalted position in the sport to help prepare the squad for the upcoming Paralympic qualifying rounds. The goal is to ensure as many members of the team as possible secure spots in Paris next year.

"We regularly engage in discussions about the number or the specific qualifying matches that would best serve our team members. And share our experiences from past competitions. The goal is for everyone to draw lessons from each other, thereby sparking the resolve and drive needed to

reach their personal objectives," Lei says.

She sees herself as a bridge between the coach and the athletes, assisting her team members to become part of this larger family. She encourages her teammates to share their own experiences, mutually enhance their skills, and jointly tackle new challenges.

Table Tennis Australia Head Coach (Para), Alois Rosario, knows he has a valuable resource to tap into.

"Her great ability is to relate to the players and have the maturity to share her thoughts with the coaches and support staff," Rosario says.

"She has a really pleasant and honest demeanour that endears her to everyone."

This connection can also extend to interpreting for teammates who are less proficient in English, assisting them in building confidence to articulate their thoughts.

"She comes with an inner confidence as a result and is willing to share those experiences with both the players and staff. She is highly intelligent both academically and emotionally so will make great decisions around working with both cohorts," Rosario adds.

As competitions draw near Lei typically introduces greater intensity to the team's training combined with the wisdom of her longevity and success.

"I approach all matches with the same attitude, whether they're high-stakes games or just practice sessions," she says.

"In large-scale competitions, it is crucial to keep your own rhythm and aim for a consistent performance."

Keeping one's own rhythm and sticking to these beliefs is her methodology, and the pragmatic advice she shares with the younger athletes.

"Before each competition, you are bound to encounter a multitude of voices. The key is to persist in believing in yourself, particularly in times of adversity—do not give up easily. When you take each step with solid footing, there will be gains. These gains are not just reflected through sporting achievements, they also help to strengthen your will and shape your character," she says.

As table tennis has unquestionably shaped Lina Lei's



IMAGE: MA LIN (LEFT) AND LINA LEI (RIGHT) TRAINING IN THE VIS GYM

LAURA COSGROVE

## RIGHT THOUGHT AT THE RIGHT TIME

You've heard of the phrase 'right place at the right time'. Right?



and plans and strategies put in place to protect performance as much as possible," Cosgrove adds.

"Psychology can be directed in both a reactive and proactive way as well as at an individual and group/program level. All of these different angles can help improve performance depending on what is a priority at the time."

Cosgrove works with the likes of Jack Rayner, Jaryd Clifford and Abbey Caldwell in the VIS Athletics Program and explains that building rapport and trust with athletes and coaches is a non-negotiable in psychology.

Prior to her role at the VIS, Cosgrove was a psychologist at the English Institute of Sport and worked across two successful Olympic cycles with Team Great Britain, including stints with British Diving and British Cycling.

"If the trust from the athletes and coaches isn't there, it is very difficult to discuss their concerns and for them to feel comfortable bringing up potentially sensitive issues," she says.

Although most of the typical concerns discussed are competition nerves, motivation, expectations, and goal setting, any life stressors that can distract from training or competition focus are considered within Cosgrove's role.

It is her view that being led off piste by emotions or thoughts is not the core issue – it's the response to them that causes the distraction.

"If we can accept and at times pre-empt these thoughts and feelings turning up, we have more mental capacity to redirect our attention to the task at hand."

To hold the right thought at the right time.

But what of the line 'right thought at the right time.'

Heard of it?

Laura Cosgrove has. In fact, the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) Performance Psychologist teaches it.

"Being able to identify when your focus has shifted to something unhelpful is the basis of the strategies I help athletes develop," says Cosgrove, who is one of a team of eight psychologists at the VIS.

"If athletes can become aware of that, returning their focus to the current moment can be done in a variety of ways, such as breathing or grounding strategies."

If a lot of psychology is centred on individuals becoming more aware of what they are thinking or feeling and how that affects their behaviour, then helping athletes identify when they are distracted and how to return their focus to what is most helpful is as important.

"By being more aware, it also means that patterns can be identified



EMILY PETRICOLA OAM

# LIVING WITH AN INVISIBLE DISABILITY

**Emily Petricola was at work when she first noticed a strange numbness in her feet.**

It was 2007 and over the next few weeks, the numbness progressed and she experienced other symptoms, including a loss of balance that caused her to trip over her feet.

She booked an appointment with her GP, who immediately referred her to a neurologist.

At just 27 years old, Emily was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) – one of the most common diseases of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord).

"It was initially a big shock. I didn't really know what it would mean, and I spent a good period of time pretending that nothing had changed," Emily says.

"I was pretty sick for the first couple of years and had relapses every few months."

The relapses, also known as 'episodes' or 'flare ups', can mean a sudden onset of new neurological symptoms, or a significant worsening of symptoms.

To treat the relapses, Emily underwent regular steroid infusions.

"There was lots of steroid treatment, and I put on a huge amount of weight for the first time in my life," she says.

"All of a sudden, to not be able to be fit and healthy – I didn't even recognise myself. It was hard to lose that part of who you are."

As one of five children growing up in Melbourne, sport had always played a huge role in her family life. As a teenager, Emily played netball and competed in elite rowing.

"Rowing is an all or nothing sport, and I was all into it straight away. I retired when I was 20 with a back injury and realised it wasn't worth it anymore."

Seven years after her MS diagnosis, Emily reached out to her friend, Matt Ryan – a now retired Australian rower, dual

Olympian, Olympic medal winner and former VIS scholarship holder.

"I asked Matt if he could help me to get fit again. He said, 'Tell me what you can do, not what you can't.' And I said, 'I can still get on a bike and turn my feet on the pedals,'" Emily says.

"After a few months of training he said, 'Your numbers look pretty good, I think you should aim for the Paralympics.' It seemed like a crazy idea."

To help prepare for her first competition, Emily spoke to another friend, five-time Australian Olympian, Shane Kelly – now a cycling coach at the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS).

"Shane was more than willing to get involved," says Emily.

"My first race ever was in Ballarat in 2015 and I came third – I thought 'Oh wow.'"

Over the next few years, Emily went on to qualify for the 2020 Tokyo Summer Paralympics, and became a Paralympic Champion.

She is now one of the most dominant para cyclists in the world, a fact reinforced by her haul of three gold medals at the 2022 Para Track World Championships and a further gold in the C4 Individual Pursuit at the World Championships in August.

Emily was showered with accolades in 2023, including the VIS Para Athlete Award, the AIS Female Para-athlete of the Year award and received a Medal of Order of Australia for service to sport.

She says it is her team, including the staff and coaches at the VIS, who inspire her.

"I feel like I am trying to honour the fact that people believe in me, and the work of the people around me. I do everything that I can do because they work so hard," she says.



"I wouldn't still be involved in the sport without the staff from the VIS.

"They do more than train my body. They've had to work around a lot of limitations – they give so much emotional support, and they are good sounding boards."

Ahead of World MS Day this year, Emily said there is still a stigma attached to the chronic disease and she hopes by sharing her story, it might help other people who have MS.

"It is not obvious what is wrong with me. That is the biggest misconception and mistake people can make.

"So much goes on behind closed doors and under the surface that impacts every part of your life...it is a really challenging disease to live with."

Emily says it's difficult to put into words what para-cycling means to her.

"It is really hard to articulate, as it has changed my whole life. It has made sense of stuff that didn't make sense. It gives your life a purpose, beyond just a job or trying to just get through. It gave me something I could aim for that was positive."

"It is one area where I can show the world what I can do, even though my body has changed in so many ways.

"My biggest achievement is continuing to be involved and striving for excellence. It is about continuing to try to be a bit better all the time."

Emily is the benchmark for C4 women globally and what she is achieving on the bike is inspiring to everyone.

For others, she is an inspiring individual who is currently living out the legacy she wishes to create, which is to make a difference for people living with MS.

CHITHIC MACHAR

# ASPIRING TO BE 'WHEELIE' GOOD

**When Chithic Machar attended a school holiday program for wheelchair basketball as a teenager in Werribee, he discovered a passion he is now turning into a career.**

Chithic, 23, was born in Egypt to South Sudanese parents, who moved to Australia as refugees when he was just two years old.

Growing up in Sydney, Chithic participated in para-athletics, like shot put and discus throw.

"I was born with spina bifida and have been in a chair my whole life. When I was little, I started doing wheelchair racing and athletics during school," Chithic says.

When Chithic moved to Melbourne as a teenager he learnt about wheelchair basketball.

"I loved the environment - the team, the ball, going up and down the court, shooting and having fun. They started saying I was getting better all the time."

This feedback motivated Chithic to try out for the Victorian State Team.

"The try outs were at the State Basketball Centre and there were a lot of people there. I gave it a go, but I didn't make the team."

Despite the setback, over the next 12 months, Chithic continued to train.

"My teammates were encouraging and at every training session they would push me along. I made the team the next year."

In February this year, Chithic was awarded a scholarship for the Victorian Institute of Sport's (VIS) newly established Wheelchair Basketball Program.

Launched last year in partnership with Basketball Australia and Basketball Victoria, the Wheelchair Basketball Program is led by VIS Head Coach, Craig Campbell.

"In Australia, there are a lot of good things happening in wheelchair basketball, particularly for players like Chithic," says Craig.

He is currently coaching Chithic once a week at the world class facilities at the VIS, focusing on performance, strength and conditioning.

"Chithic gives effort no matter what and he always exceeds other people's expectations about what is possible," says Craig.

"We work well together, it's easy to coach good people. He gets in, asks questions and learns. He is so coachable and that makes our job easier."

Chithic's dream is to play wheelchair basketball overseas for Australia, and says it is his teammates and coach who continue to inspire and motivate him.

"Basketball is a big family, everyone uplifts each other. My



teammates, the coach - everyone is there for each other no matter what."

Craig explains that it takes more than technical ability and tactical skills to become an elite athlete like Chithic.

"Some sports use the term 'grit' and 'coachability' and that is the X-factor. People need to be coachable, and you can teach skills, but you can't teach having fire in the belly or love of the game. That comes from within, that is where they get the grit from."

"With Chithic's ability and ambition, it is exciting to see where he ends up and we will do whatever we can to help him to get there."

Wheelchair basketball is the fastest growing sport for athletes with disability, according to Disability Sports Australia. It is played in 80 countries and has more than 100,000 players.



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# ATHLETES AND INTERNS TO PROFESSIONALS

By Yuxuan Du



Sylvie Withers was an aspiring rower when she was introduced to the Victorian Institute of Sport via a work placement in the rowing department. While on that placement the VIS sports science internship program caught her attention and prompted her to apply, setting the stage for a transition from athlete to sports scientist.

Today, Withers is the VIS Innovation and Research Project Manager.

"I was lucky enough to get a sports science internship," says Withers, who used the opportunity to conduct her honours research into the impact of heat acclimation on rowing performance.

Curiosity, high performance and the 'Win in Sport and Life' mantra being integral to the culture of the VIS meant that doors kept opening for Withers. She secured a part-time laboratory assistant position with the VIS and so her professional career was born.

"That first foot in the door gave me the opportunity to start building my career," she says.

"My current role is a shift from the daily training environment to influencing the level of innovation and guiding creativity in projects.

"It's an exciting time to be able to just say, 'yes', to some of the obscure ideas that

people might have or trial new technology or strategies."

Similarly, Will Morgan's journey from a Physical Preparation Coach to his current position as VIS Physical Preparation Manager began with an internship in 2007. Progressing from a casual role to part-time, then full-time, Morgan kept building his professional capabilities and understanding of life in high performance.

After a stint elsewhere in the industry Morgan was drawn back to the VIS, bringing with him an array of experiences and skills.

"I always had fond memories of working at the VIS and was pretty keen to come back.

I think it's the best place to work in elite sport in Melbourne," he says.

Sian Whittaker and Alice Neill, both former athletes, have chosen to stay in elite sport as Performance Coordinators at the VIS. They credit their experiences as athletes and the connections they built within the VIS as crucial factors in their career progression.

"Being an athlete at the VIS honed my dedication and perseverance but also revealed those traits to others, which eventually led to my role as a performance coordinator," says Whittaker, who was a world junior swimming championship silver medallist.

A VIS Performance Lifestyle Advisor encouraged Neill, an aerial skier, to think of life beyond the slopes and jumps.

"She helped me do some career testing and some career planning which I had not experienced before. That was a major factor in identifying what I was good at and pointing me in the direction of where I wanted to go," Neill says.

If they could go back to when they were starting as interns or athletes at the VIS, what advice would Withers, Morgan, Whittaker and Neill give to their younger selves?

Withers, with 16 years of experience in sports science, recognises how important it was for her to venture beyond the familiarity of what she was most comfortable with. She knows that to stay within the confines of rowing, her area of expertise, would have been the easy choice.

Now, change and the challenges of unfamiliarity are the favourite parts of her mission to innovate.

"Working with programs and sports that I have no history with, keeps it really exciting," she says.

As a home to almost 50 Olympic and Paralympic sports and athletes in various

stages of development - raw to podium ready - the VIS is something of a hot-house of ambition, performance, medical and sporting research, success, failure, injury, recovery and so much more.

For Morgan, the VIS is an endlessly fascinating environment.

"At the VIS, you can give yourself a variety of environments and experiences to learn from," he says.

Reflecting on her journey, Whittaker believes that the power of authenticity and self-belief cannot be overstated.

"Trust yourself and just be yourself, a lot of the time it will tell you where you're supposed to be heading in life," she says.

Morgan speaks of his mentor, VIS General Manager of High Performance, Harry Brennan, and snowboarder, Scotty James, to explain how the VIS has developed his professional path.

"Harry, as a mentor, has been invaluable," Morgan says.

"He taught me a lot early on in my career about coaching and the importance of coaching and fundamentals,"

It has been the professionalism of James, a multiple world champion and Olympic medallist who he has worked closely with for many years, that has offered Morgan lessons he can use with other athletes.

"Athlete wise, Scotty's approach to his career and his professionalism sets him apart. He is a really good example for any aspiring athletes."

Neill says her sporting education was helped immeasurably by being in the presence of so many other elite athletes at the VIS - especially the senior aerial skiers - and her VIS nutritionist Kylie Andrew.

"I was here a lot for training and seeing so many successful athletes around, it was so amazing to think I was in the same place.



IMAGE: SYLVIE WITHERS (RIGHT)

I remember I trained at the same time as Scotty James and thought, "wow, this is really cool," she says.

The sustained commitment to a sport, the driven passion, and the warm welcome she received when she returned as a colleague to the VIS remain deeply moving experiences for Neill.

As for Whittaker, it is former mentors and now colleagues Withers and VIS physiologist Kristal Hammond whom she offers particular credit.

Withers' advocacy for women's health and professional development, along with Kristal's support when Whittaker was diagnosed and dealing with endometriosis, opened Whittaker's mind to possibilities outside of the pool.

"One of the really amazing things about working at the VIS is you are surrounded by the most highly motivated people all the time."

This story was presented by Open Universities Australia, a valued partner of the Victorian Institute of Sport. Contact OUA for further information about courses designed for careers in high performance sport or to explore degrees and subjects available through OUA.

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# COMMUNITY PROGRAMS 2023

With a return to something like post-COVID normality and the re-opening of the refurbished Victorian Institute of Sport in February, VIS Community Programs also made a comeback.



Over the course of the year almost 2300 students visited the VIS and, significantly, VIS athletes presented to over 20,000 students around Victoria.

With the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games on the horizon, demand for insights into the world of high performance was extraordinarily high. Bookings from schools for the first term of the 2024 Victorian school year were heavy in November.

There were tours of the VIS by Sport Singapore, Sport and Recreation Victoria, the various Victorian Regional Academies of Sport and schools from New South Wales and Western Australia. Over 1000 people attended the first VIS open day in four years. But the greatest demand came from interest in the Be Fit. Be Well program. Almost 15,000 students were involved in the program which is designed to emphasise the link between physical activity and wellbeing, a message delivered by Olympians and Paralympians such as Brooke Buschkuell, Liam Twomey, Tess Lloyd, Melissa Tapper and Al Viney.

Over 1300 students worked their way through the Sports Advancement Series, a program offering Victorian Government secondary school students the opportunity to learn from VIS experts in the areas of nutrition and sport science. These education sessions are aimed at high ability learners and are informed by the Year 7/8, Year 9/10 and Year 11/12 curriculum for health and physical education.

The Play On program, spearheaded by World Championship silver medallist race walker Jemima Montag, was also popular. Similar to the Be Fit. Be Well program but with an emphasis on girls overcoming barriers to playing sport and remaining active, Play On delivered its important message to almost 1500 primary and secondary students.

“Al Viney is an inspirational young woman who has demonstrated the will to succeed despite a life-changing event that for many may have put an end to their future hopes and aspirations.

On the night of her Year 12 graduation, the already accomplished athlete was a passenger in the back seat of a car that was hit by a drunk driver. Her instinct to cradle her friend's head in her arms saved her friend's life but resulted in Al permanently damaging her left arm and ultimately destroying her future plans to represent Australia as a rower (or so she thought).

Fast forward a few years and an encounter with another athlete who happened to have lost the capacity to use her right arm and you have a partnership that has returned both women to the sport they love. The current plan - Paris in 2024.

Al's story is a reminder to all of us of the power of self-belief and the importance of being adaptable when challenges and setbacks come our way.”

— Melbourne High School



“Last week we were lucky enough to have a visit from Paralympic and Olympic table tennis champion, Milly Tapper. Milly talked to the students about her journey to becoming an Olympian and spoke of the wonderful people she has encountered along the way and how they haven't let their disabilities stop them becoming elite athletes. She spoke about showing up everyday and doing your best and being grateful for what you have. All students absolutely loved hearing Milly's story - she is an amazing and inspiring person!

Without a doubt, one of the highlights was being able to try on her Olympic uniforms and touch and try on a real life Olympic medal!

— Officer Primary School



Find out more about our Community Programs

MELISSA BARBIERI

## 'BUBS' WILL ALWAYS BE ONE OF THE FAMILY



Upon receiving the 2023 Frank Pyke Award Lydia Lassila, a Victorian Institute of Sport scholarship holder for the 16 years of her incredible aerial skiing career, spoke of a bond that for her still exists with the VIS.

From Finland, where she now resides with her husband and two sons, Lassila said: “I love my VIS family.”

The description of her relationship with the VIS in familial terms was not lost on anyone in the room or a surprise.

The decidedly holistic care of its athletes and the intimacy of the VIS environment means that a strong connection often exists between the two long after competitive retirement has called.

Once a VIS athlete, always a VIS athlete.

Which is why it was a joy earlier this year for many at the VIS to see Melissa Barbieri recognised with the Professional Football Association's highest individual honour, the Alex Tobin Medal.

Affectionately known as “Bubs”, Barbieri was a long-time scholarship holder and, at times, the friendly face on the VIS reception desk.

Her achievements on the pitch as a goalkeeper made her one of Australia's finest ever players but it was who she is, as much as what she did, and her fight for others which made many proud.

Barbieri used her voice, and elevated the voice of many others, to improve the plight of female footballers in Australia.

She was central to the industrial action the Matildas took in 2015 and was a living example of the need for a world-class maternity policy when she balanced motherhood with elite football following the birth of her daughter, Holly, in 2013.

Her ambition and drive to improve the game undoubtedly left it in a better place for the next generation.

Nerissa Byrne, VIS Performance Health Services Coordinator, had the pleasure of working with ‘Bubs’ during her time on scholarship at the VIS.

“As an athlete she was determined, focussed, and never let anything get in her way,” Byrne recalled.

“Her dedication speaks volumes, and she was determined that women would get the same opportunities as men in the football arena, which was a certain challenge to the way things were. She was a very grounded athlete, never got ahead of herself and had the utmost respect for teammates and colleagues. She always utilised and was grateful for the support she received from VIS.”

Barbieri represented Australia in a Summer Olympics, four Women's World Cups, and was captain of the Matildas as they won the 2010 AFC Women's Asian Cup, the first senior Australian team to win an Asian continental competition. Barbieri earned 86 International Caps.

With the Tobin medal, the Matildas' immortal joined some of the giants of Australian football such as Craig Johnston, Mark Viduka, Mark Schwarzer, Harry Kewell and Cheryl Salisbury, Barbieri's former captain.

The 43-year-old is only the second female to have won the award, after Salisbury, and was especially thrilled to receive it on the eve of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup during which Australia captured the imagination of the nation with some wonderful football and finished fourth.

“I'm truly humbled,” Barbieri said.

“Being alongside some of the greats of our game in this country, let alone being alongside Cheryl, my former captain, it's such a blessing.”



VIS Alumni are encouraged to update their contact and professional details by clicking on the attached QR code or by contacting Alumni coordinator Stephanie Moorhouse on [stephanie.moorhouse@vis.org.au](mailto:stephanie.moorhouse@vis.org.au)





RHYDIAN COWLEY

# AN ATHLETE FOR GOOD

**In October, dual Olympian and Victorian Institute of Sport race walker Rhydian Cowley was selected for the P&G Athlete for Good Program. The 32 year-old received approximately \$38,000 AUD for his chosen charity Bush Heritage Australia.**



The Athletes for Good program champions Olympic and Paralympic athletes from around the world and the charitable causes important to them.

Environmental sustainability and climate action had long been of interest to Rhydian but it wasn't until the Black Summer Bushfires that he decided to become more actively involved in his response to climate change.

"It was during the first lockdown, just after the bush fires in 2019, I had a lot of time to think about things and really clarify what my values were outside of my sport.

"I love being active, being outdoors and just having that real connection to the place I am in," Rhydian said.

"I had also started to see the impact climate change was having on my sport, with a recent training camp being interrupted by the bushfires. It was that realisation that people may not be able to always enjoy being outside, if the air is full of smoke!"

"I remember thinking to myself, well if this is something that is important to me then I should really do something about it, that I should live by those values and demonstrate them through my actions".

As a first step, Rhydian began researching local organisations in the sustainability sector he could support financially and lend

his voice to as an Olympic athlete. It wasn't long before he came across Bush Heritage Australia, a not-for-profit conservation organisation that works to protect Australia's ecosystems and wildlife.

Bush Heritage Australia uses the best science, conservation and right-way knowledge to deliver landscape-scale impact while working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the agricultural sector to ensure their impact is deep, sustainable and collaborative.

"Bush Heritage was an organisation that was doing the sort of work that really aligned with my values," Rhydian said.

"For me, the model of making sure there's the respect for traditional owners was also really important".

Initially becoming a donor of the not-for-profit, Rhydian is now a full-time employee working in the 'Gifts in Wills' team to help fundraise for its conservation activities. He is also a member of the organisation's 'Green Team', which aims to reduce the environmental impact of the organization's activities.

A self-proclaimed 'yes man', Rhydian loves to get involved and often puts himself forward for various opportunities. For instance, he is currently a member of Athletics Australia's Athlete Advisory Committee, playing a key role in the very early stages of their sustainability journey, as well as being an athlete ambassador for Sports Environment Alliance, EcoAthletes and Front Runners.

So, when he saw the Paris 2024 Athlete for Good grant advertised on the IOC's Athlete 365 portal, it made sense to apply.

"The application involved an online form where we were asked to share our story and what we were doing outside of sport to give back in certain areas,"

"The area I applied under was in climate change and sustainability, we were then

asked to nominate the charity of our choice, explain the work we had been doing with the charity in the past and what the funding would help the charity achieve," Rhydian explained.

"I decided to choose Bush Heritage Australia for the grant, because of my long history working with the charity and the strong relationship I had built with them".

Rhydian worked closely with the grants coordinator at Bush Heritage to write and submit his application and after a seven month wait, he was announced as one of 20 athletes to receive a grant.

"It was so nice to receive the official announcement and to know that I am able to contribute to the organisation in an additional way, on top of the work I am already doing."

It is now up to Bush Heritage Australia to decide what exactly the funds will be used for, with the money going towards initiatives such as supporting on-the-ground conservation work at one of their 42 reserves and/or funding their partnership work with Indigenous ranger groups.

Currently training towards Paris 2024, Rhydian continues to use his platform as an Olympic and VIS athlete to advocate for climate action and is intent on doing his part to make the world a better place.

"I remember when I was first starting to get involved in climate action, I didn't know if there were any other athletes who were worried about it. But as I have progressed with it, I have come to realise that there are actually quite a lot of athletes who are worried about climate change and who have noticed the impact it has had on their sport," Rhydian said.

"It has been really great to build these networks and connections with other athletes, we have been able to support each other by sharing knowledge and what we've been doing in different spaces."

"While I am not the entrepreneurial type, for me it's just about going in and getting in the trenches with someone that's already got a good idea, joining in and helping in any way that I can - that's the way I like to approach it."

"The community engagement networks of the Australian Olympic Committee, Australian Institute of Sport, Victorian Institute of Sport and Athletics Australia have also been a great avenue for me to get involved in climate and sustainability initiatives."

Since learning of the grant, Rhydian has joined Champions for a Better World, a group of nine athletes brought together by World Athletics to represent six continental areas of the world and give voice to sustainability campaigning within athletics.

He has joined a distinguished international lineup of athletes that includes Kelsey-Lee Barber (Australia, javelin), Ajla Del Ponte (Switzerland, sprints), Alison Dos Santos (Brazil, hurdles), Sam Mattis (USA, discus), Eliza McCartney (New Zealand, pole vault), Ernest John Obiena (Philippines, pole vault), Elena Vallortigara (Italy, high jump) and Hugues Fabrice Zango (Burkina Faso, triple jump).

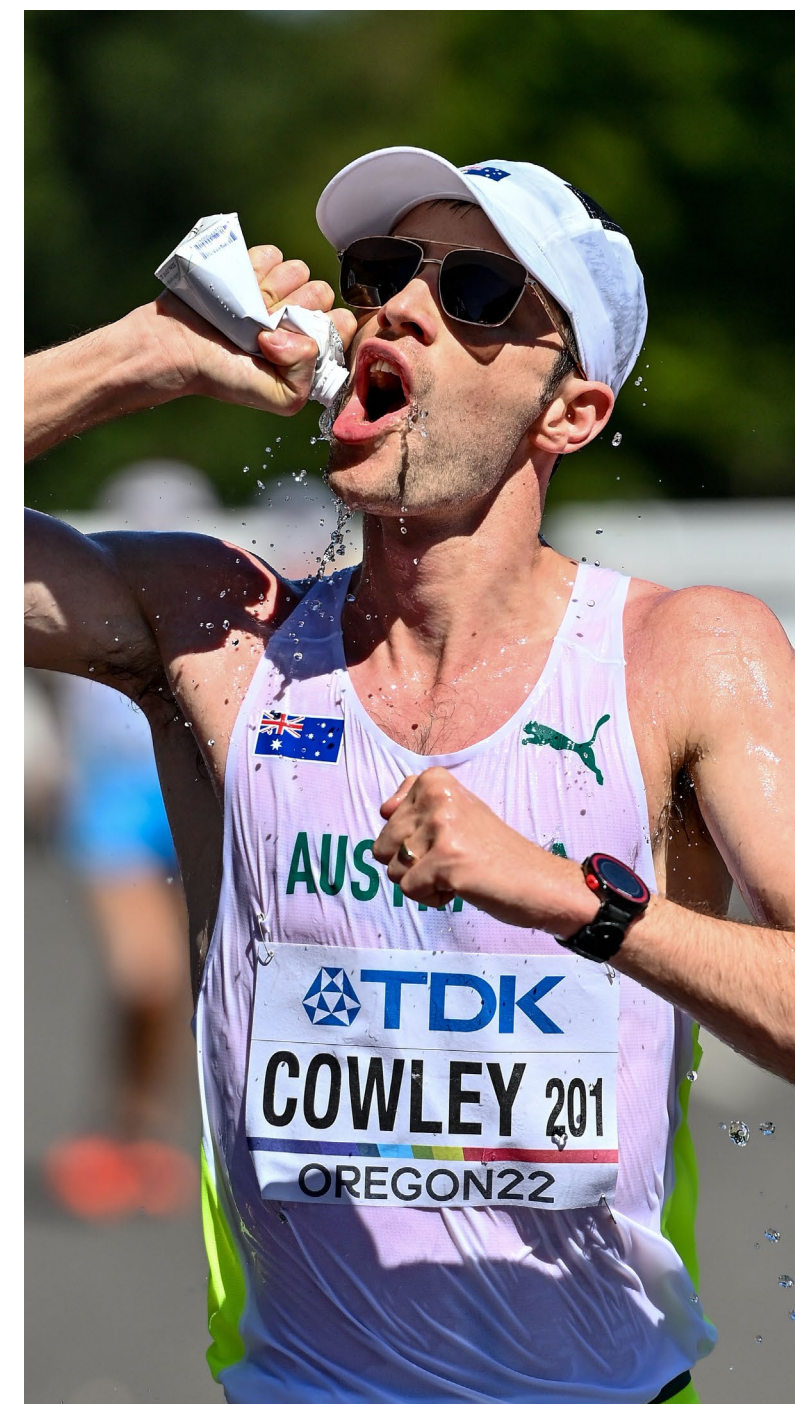
In late November, World Athletics published results from a survey of almost 400 athletes at the World Athletic Championships in Budapest which made the claim that 75% of athletes perceive a direct negative impact on their health and performance due to climate change.

The survey also revealed that four in five athletes at the championships were seriously concerned about climate change and air quality, with 2023 poised to be the hottest year on record and more frequent extreme weather events likely to impact the health of athletes and the sport.

When asked what advice he would give those who are interested in getting involved in climate action, the 32-year-old said to just start somewhere no matter how big or small.

"The first step is just to do something. It can be as simple as reflecting on what you do in your life, in your sport or at work and understanding how you can have a lower environmental footprint."

"Individually, no one person is going to solve climate change by themselves, it will take lots of us working together. So just starting somewhere and doing what you can, I think, is a good first step."



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BILL TAIT

# FAREWELL TO AN OLD FRIEND

**In August, the Victorian Institute of Sport farewelled Bill Tait.**

As goodbyes go, it was tough. Tait had been with the VIS for 29 years – the VIS itself has existed for 33 years – and no-one had served the organisation for longer. Or more passionately.

A proud Victorian, Tait saw the VIS from almost every angle.

His association started with the offer of a rowing scholarship in 1994. Through until 2002, when his career as an athlete finished and the seeds of his next career were sown, Tait was coached by the legendary Noel Donaldson.

He enjoyed a distinguished career on the water, competing at senior World Rowing Championships in the Men's Eight and several Interstate Championships for Victoria.

Out of the boat, Tait kept his head above water by working as a VIS receptionist – a tradition for VIS athletes that lives on today – while studying Applied Science and Exercise Physiology at Australian Catholic University. He graduated in 2005.

Soon after, he started to give back with experience and expertise some of what the VIS had given him.

In 2009, after time as assistant, he was appointed Head Coach of the Rowing program. He moved into a Performance Manager role in 2017 before moving into the role of General Manager - High Performance in 2022.

In a sense, he went from answering calls to making them.

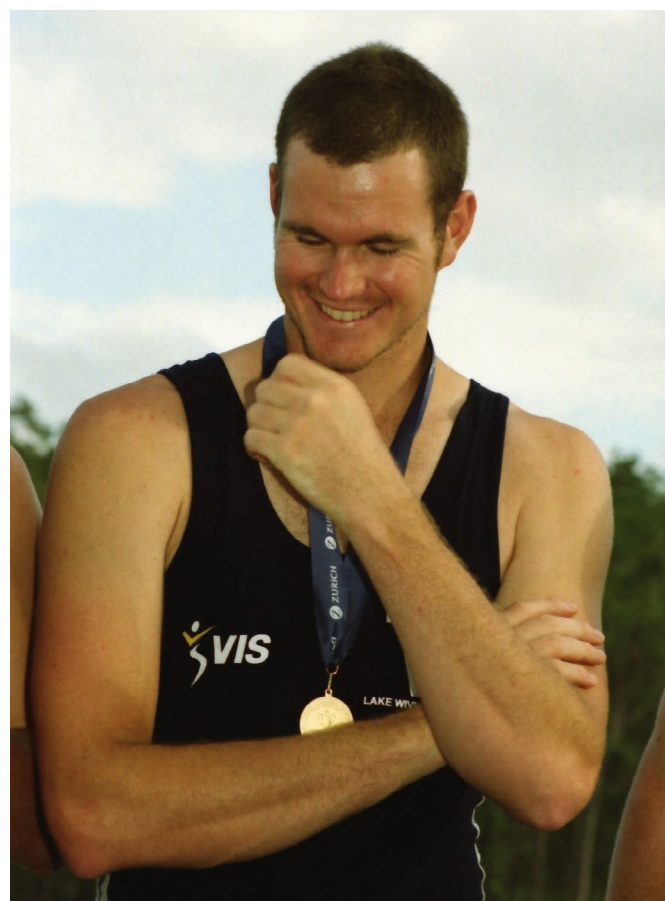
“Across his 29-year journey at the VIS, it would be fair to say that we have been with him through many of his personal and professional milestones,” said VIS CEO Anne Marie Harrison.

Tait coached VIS athletes to World Championship and Olympic medals, the most personally affecting success being to guide his late wife Sarah and crewmate Kate Hornsey to a silver medal in the Women's Coxless Pair at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Sarah passed away in 2016 at the age of 33 due to cervical cancer. The VIS honours her name annually with the Sarah Tait Spirit Award.

Tait's insight and athlete-focussed passion shaped many of the strategic initiatives the VIS undertook in recent years and in the last year of his tenure he was credited with “standing up” the new Triathlon and Coach Development programs.

“Bill has always had a fierce desire to get the right result for athletes, coaches, and sports, and without that the VIS would not be where it is today. I want to acknowledge the service and support Bill has given the VIS over an extended period, which will be missed,” said VIS Director of High Performance, Dave Crosbee.



Added Harrison: “He has also always been an advocate for women at the VIS – athletes, coaches and staff. He keeps all of us on song and honest about ensuring that there are no barriers for any staff member, but particularly for the women and girls.”

Tait's interest in and contribution to the broader health of Australian high-performance sport – involvement, for instance, in the post-Tokyo Olympics debrief processes and a role in development of Australia's High Performance 2032+ Sport Strategy – have ultimately led Tait from the VIS to the Australian Sports Commission.

In a new role of Director of Performance Systems and Paralympic Partnerships, Tait will be advancing the journey of para-athletes and sports in the lead up to Paris 2024 and beyond.

“We're obviously delighted that this opportunity has presented itself for Bill, and that he's in a position to take it up and develop his skills further, with two of our partners through the ASC and PA, and importantly it retains his skills, experience and knowledge within Australia during this really important time,” Harrison said.

For Tait, after almost three decades of life with the VIS, the move amounted to a professional and personal leap.

“It's a massive step for me, but it is time for me to be a little bold and take on a new challenge. In arriving at this decision, I have been incredibly well supported by Dave and Anne Marie, and although this is not at all surprising, it is certainly not taken for granted,” he said.

Clearly, there was never going to be an easy time for Tait to say goodbye to the VIS. Equally, there was never going to be an easy time for the VIS to say goodbye to Tait. It is tough to think of the organisation without his presence, insights, and loyalty.

IMAGE: BILL TAIT AFTER WINNING GOLD AT THE 2001 NATIONAL ROWING CHAMPIONSHIPS.

VICTORIAN INSTITUTE OF SPORT

# FACILITIES UPGRADE

**In February, the Victorian Institute of Sport opened the doors on its refurbished high-performance centre at Lakeside Stadium in Albert Park.**

The upgrade was something of a necessity and an investment in the future.

The VIS had nearly doubled the number of athletes on scholarship – it is now home to over 450 athletes and 48 sports – and needed the capacity a refurbishment could provide.

It was also that to be competing into the foreseeable future – in the pool and out, on the track and off – the best possible research and specialist services are required. Particularly if, as is the case at the VIS, success is defined in holistic terms.

VIS CEO, Anne Marie Harrison, officially opened the reborn facility after a welcome to country and smoking ceremony performed by Eric Edwards, an Elder from the Bunurong Land Council, in the presence of indigenous former scholarship holder Kyle Vander-Kuyp and Melbourne Vixens netballer Gabby Coffey whose mother, Cate, is a Wiradjuri woman from New South Wales.

“The facility upgrade comes at an important time for Victorian athletes in the lead up to the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games,” Harrison said.

“High performance sport is often a matter of millimetres or tenths of a second. Our aim is to ensure that every one of our athletes is given the best opportunity to succeed, in sport and life. Today, we can say our facility is world class.”

The upgrade includes a new second gym, state-of-the-art medical facilities, including a dedicated recovery room, an expanded kitchen space to better deliver VIS nutrition programs, as well as new athlete lounge areas that contain meeting rooms and study booths.

The lounge area also features a commissioned indigenous artwork by Katie Budgen.

Year 12 student and emerging table tennis star, Nicholas Lum, spoke on the day of the re-opening about how the upgraded athlete study area will help him balance school and sport.

Lum was the second youngest table tennis player ever to represent Australia at a Commonwealth Games when he donned the green and gold at the 2022 Birmingham Games.

“The flexibility to study and train means that it is not a case of sport or school. Balancing the two is important,” Lum said.

World champion Para-cyclist Emily Petricola was also eager to inspect her new-look sporting home.

“From the new gym set up through to athlete lounge and medical suites – it will all aid not only the progression of training, but also helps place a greater emphasis on recovery for the athletes as well,” Petricola said.

“I couldn't ever have achieved what I have without the people working within the VIS. Harry Brennan, Shane Kelly and Andrew Fooks have been integral in my development and with more athletes there is more need for support.





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