



Paralympic power

PHOTOGRAPH Reflected glory:
Sophie Pascoe in action
Peter Meecham/The Press

As all eyes turn to Beijing in August for the Olympic Games, they would be wise to linger there for the Paralympics, no less a contest of sporting excellence than the Olympics.

New Zealand has a proud track record at the Paralympics, returning from the 2004 Athens games with six gold, one silver and three bronze medals.

This year, a 30-strong team will take on 4000 elite athletes from 120 countries competing in the Paralympics from September 6-17 in the same venues and games village as the Olympic Games.

The elite of disabled sports competitors, Paralympic athletes have the same strength of will and gruelling training schedules as their able-bodied counterparts.

New Zealand is competing in seven of the 18 sports at the Paralympics – athletics, wheelchair rugby, powerlifting, cycling, swimming, shooting and boccia (a game in which teams aim leather balls at a small white target ball.)

The team has a strong track record – among

the competitors are Athens gold medallists Tim Prendergast and Matt Slade (athletics) and Michael Johnson (shooting) and the Wheel Blacks (wheelchair rugby). Current world record holders Paula Tesoriero (cycling) and Jessica Hamill (athletics) are also on the team. And leading it as chef de mission is four-time Paralympic gold medallist Duane Kale.

Paralympics NZ chief executive Fiona Allan says the team is slightly smaller than the 36-strong team for the Athens Paralympics, as strict selection criteria have been applied.

“The 30 athletes selected have demonstrated that they are capable of medal-winning performances in Beijing. The whole team is very focussed on achieving these goals and we believe that this will be the best-prepared team we have ever sent to a Paralympic Games.”

Try dragging most teenagers out of bed at 5am and you're not likely to get a positive response. For New Zealand's youngest-ever Paralympian, swimmer Sophie Pascoe, 15, early morning starts are just part of the deal in the arduous lead-up to Beijing.

Sophie, who lost her lower leg in a lawn mower accident at age two, will compete in all five swimming events at the Beijing Paralympics, and says preparation for the event takes a lot of hard work.

“You have to work hard if you want to achieve things. There is a lot of commitment involved but you have to have goals in your life – and work hard to reach them.”

For Sophie that involves nine training sessions a week in the pool, plus two gym sessions a week. Several days a week she is training both before and after school – which means she's in the pool at 5.30am and doesn't get home from training till 7pm.

“Sometimes I don't feel like training, but you just have to force yourself through that. Motivation and support from my family and school really helps a lot.”

Sophie has to squeeze in her study commitments in year 11 at Lincoln High School around her training schedule, but she says, for now, swimming comes first.

While Sophie gets advice from a nutritionist,

she doesn't have to follow a special diet to prepare for Beijing, “just lots of carbs: raspberry buns and muesli bars.”

As Sophie can't remember what it was like having both legs, she says she doesn't feel any different from other people or disadvantaged by her disability.

Out of the pool Sophie uses an artificial leg, and has undergone operations on her stump every two years to correct bone growth, but she's not complaining.

She has been swimming competitively since age 10 and at local meets she competes against “able bodied” swimmers. She says the loss of her lower leg doesn't slow her down much in the water, as most of her power comes from her upper body.

Last year Sophie won five gold medals at the World Wheelchair and Amputee Games in Taiwan and has high hopes for the Paralympics.

“I hope to come home with a medal, and if it is gold then that's a bonus. My main goal is just to go out there and swim my hardest.”

Sophie Pascoe

