

A remarkable tale of gain with lots of pain

Kaleb van der Merwe is already one of the real heroes of the South African Commonwealth Team without him having swum one stroke.

Imagine being in so much pain that you got to be put on a drip in a hospital's intensive care unit.

That is a reality for Van der Merwe. And it does not just happen once in a while. In a lousy month, he could end up in hospital on a few occasions.

In spite of this, the Tuks swimmer has qualified to swim the 100m-breaststroke and the 200m individual medley in the Paralympic S8-category at the Games.

Van der Merwe admits to being relatively inexperienced when it comes to international competitions, however, he is still optimistic about getting a good result.

"If I can equal my best time of 1:43.29 in the breaststroke there is a realistic chance of me qualifying for the finals. But the main goal, for now, is to gain as much experience as possible that will hopefully stand me to good stead in the built-up to the 2020 Paralympic Games in Tokyo," said Van der Merwe who holds six South African and two African records in his category.

His best time in the 200m individual medley is a time of 2:46.86.

Van der Merwe was always passionate about participating in sport because his family believes in the principle that a healthy body leads to a healthy mind. At first he was an avid cricketer, athlete and soccer player. To use his own

words he was not that good but he enjoyed every moment being out on the sports field.

In 2009, Van der Merwe's life was changed irrevocably. He was involved in a serious motor accident.

"Don't ask me what happened because I cannot remember anything. My right arm and shoulder got so badly injured that I am paralysed. I got no feeling. I can move my fingers a bit, but that is pretty much it," he explained.

The medical term for his condition is brachial plexus. A brachial plexus injury occurs when these nerves are stretched, compressed, or in the most severe cases, ripped apart or torn away from the spinal cord.

His dad, Gerhard, said there was no chance of recovery. He was the one who suggested swimming.

"I did, but I did not enjoy it at all. After just one week I quit," said Van der Merwe.

"A few months later I decided to give swimming another go. My dad arranged for a personal instructor at the gym to coach me. After a few months of training, the instructor advised my dad that I should get proper coaching," said the first-year law student at Tuks.

That led to him ending up matriculating at TuksSport High School where he was and still is being coached by Rocco Meiring.

"Swimming has certainly changed my life. I now realise that nothing is impossible if you are prepared to put your mind to it," said the young swimmer.



Kaleb van der Merwe performs in the swimming pool, despite constant pain due to his disability. **Photo: Reg Caldecott**