

KALEB VAN DER MERWE



AT GREAT PAINS

THIS PRETORIA SWIMMER HAS
BROKEN MORE BARRIERS THAN
MOST. BY WILHELM DE SWARDT

Before having swum a stroke, Kaleb van der Merwe was already one of the real heroes of South Africa's 2018 Commonwealth Games team.

Imagine being in so much pain that you need to be put on a drip in an intensive care unit. That's still very much a reality for Van der Merwe. And it doesn't just happen once

in a while – in a bad month, he can end up in hospital more than once.

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

Van der Merwe admits to being relatively inexperienced when it comes to international competitions,

but is still optimistic about getting a good result.

'If I can equal my best time of 1min 43.29sec in the breaststroke, there's a realistic chance of me qualifying for the finals. But the main goal, for now, is to gain as much experience as possible, which will hopefully stand me in good stead in the buildup to the 2020 Paralympic Games in Tokyo,' says

REG CALDECOTT



*'Swimming changed my life.
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To use his own words, he wasn't that good, but he enjoyed every moment being out on the sports field.

It was in 2009 that Van der Merwe's life was changed irrevocably when he was involved in a serious car accident.

'Don't ask me what happened because I cannot remember anything,' he says. 'My right arm and shoulder got so badly injured that they are paralysed. I can move my fingers a bit, but that's pretty much it.'

The medical term for his condition is brachial plexus. A brachial plexus injury occurs when nerves are stretched, compressed or, in the most severe cases, ripped apart or torn away from the spinal cord. According to his dad, Gerhard, there's no chance of recovery.

It was his dad that suggested he take up swimming.

'I did, but I didn't enjoy it at all. After just one week I quit. But a few months later I decided to give it another go and my dad arranged for a personal instructor at the gym to coach me.'

This time around, it did not take Van der Merwe long to master the finer intricacies of swimming. More importantly, he started to enjoy it. After a few months of training, the instructor advised Van der Merwe's

dad to make sure his son got proper coaching as he had some real talent. That led to him matriculating at TuksSport High School, where he was (and still is) coached by Rocco Meiring.

'Swimming changed my life. I now realise that nothing is impossible if you're prepared to put your mind to it.'

In fact, his advice to anybody who has suffered a traumatic setback is to never quit on life. 'I try to live life to the fullest every day. It's not always possible but the important thing is that you try to do so.'

'My dad is my role model. It was him who was always encouraging me to keep going. He was also the first to believe in my talents as a swimmer.'

If you speak to Gerhard van der Merwe, he'll tell you his son is his role model. 'Kaleb doesn't know the meaning of giving up and that motivates him and everybody who knows him.'

'But I cannot tell you what it does to one as a parent when you see your son experiencing such a severe pain attack that there's nothing you can do but get him to the hospital for him to obtain some relief.' ■

De Swardt is communications officer for the High Performance Centre in Pretoria.

DID YOU KNOW?
The brachial plexus is a complex neural network. It's located in the neck; extending into the axilla posterior to the clavicle.

Van der Merwe, who holds six South African and two African records in his category.

His best effort in the 200m IM is 2:46.86. He's also the national junior record holder in the 50m backstroke, 100m backstroke, 50m breaststroke, 200m breaststroke and 50m butterfly. He set African records in the 100m backstroke and 200m breaststroke.

And to top it all, he also holds the senior SA record in the 50m butterfly.

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.

