



Go to...

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## Donvale athlete set for world championships



*Ross Solly, Sunday, 7 April 2013*

Gary Connors

Gary Connor could already be considered a high achiever, and one suspects he's about to add a couple more grand achievements to his CV.

The 47-year-old from Donvale, Victoria, won the national paracanoe title for his division at the Australian championships in Perth at the weekend.

It moves him one stage closer to Australian selection for the World Championships in Germany later this year. And ultimately, Rio in 2016. Paracanoe has recently been added to the Paralympics program.

Post-race Connor admitted nerves almost got the better of him.

"I felt incredibly anxious," he said.

"I expect a lot of myself. I train hard, I get up early, and it all bottles up inside me and I can't release it. Hopefully this sort of racing is a step towards that."

It's all a long way from the fateful day in 1988, when tradesman Gary Connor fell through the second storey floor of a hospital he was working on.

The accident left him paralysed from the hips down.

Until then Connor had been incredibly active, splitting his time between waterskiing, snow skiing and motocross.

"My father made a statement at the time, that out of his three kids, if he had to choose one for this to happen too, he would choose me," Connor said.

"I had more get up and go, I'd probably accept this a bit better than the others."

Helping steer Connor towards a return to sport was multi-paralympian, Sandy Blythe, who mentored a lot of patients.

"He used to sit by my bed, saying Gary you're still going to be living life, you're still going to be driving a car, you're still going to be going out raging," Connor said.

"I'd see him doing something in his wheelchair, and I had to copy him."

Blythe's wise words had the desired effect. Connor began playing basketball, then tennis, then hand cycling.

The latter has led to him completing the three-peaks challenge in Melbourne, twice, making him one of only two disabled people to achieve the goal.

He's also cycled through Vietnam and Cambodia, and later this year he plans to circumnavigate Fiji.

But it's paracanoe which has captured his heart now. He kayaked 20 years ago, and didn't need much convincing to return to the sport.

"I'm loving it," he said.

"It's a different kind of fitness altogether. It's a challenge, but if I'm going to do something I'm going to give it 110 per cent or I'm not going to do it."

He'll be 51 when Rio comes around, but don't try telling him he'll be too old.

"Look if the wheels haven't fallen off, I'm there. I'm still cycling, I'm still keeping fit, and I've seen great results in the seven months I've been paddling," Connor said.

"If I double the program I'm doing now in the next couple of years, I think it's scary. I think I can push some pretty quick times."

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