

# Athlete's recovery from personal Greek tragedy

By Michael Barrett

Four years ago Jai Waite was swimming miles from anywhere on the Greek Island of Ios.

He dived under a wave, hit a sandbank, and received an injury that cost him the use of his legs.

He has gone back to Greece as part of the New Zealand wheelchair rugby team competing in the Athens Paralympics.

Waite saw his first game of wheelchair rugby on TV being played at the Sydney Paralympics.

He watched the game from his bed at the Otago rehab hospital.

A keen sportsman before his accident, Waite went along to a local club after he left hospital in March 2001, and got started in the fast-paced and confrontational sport of wheelchair rugby.

**"When you first get in a wheelchair people try and treat you gently. They think you're fragile. It's great to get out there and have a bash around."**

Three and a half years later he has made it to the top of his chosen sport.

The physical nature of wheelchair rugby was an initial attraction.

"The contact is a good thing. When you first get in a wheelchair people try and treat you gently. They think you're fragile.

"It's great to get out there and

have a bash around."

Waite is one of nine squad members going to Athens, and says that most of the players in the team have a history of competitive sports, playing mostly rugby, league, cricket and basketball.

Head coach Grant Sharman is confident that his team will perform well at the games, and says not too much should be read into the fact they are ranked only sixth of the eight teams competing.

"On our day if we play to our full potential we can beat anyone," he says.

The rankings were decided after the world championships in Sweden last year.

The USA is top seed, followed by Canada and Australia.

Wheelchair rugby combines elements of rugby, basketball and American football.

Four players from each team are on the court at any time, but a player can be sent off for one minute if he commits a defensive foul.

The game is played on a basketball court, and tries are scored by crossing the line with the ball in hand.

Games are broken up into quarters lasting eight minutes.

They are hard and fast with plenty of collisions and spills.

Stops for repairs to the specially modified chairs are common.

Every player is assessed with regard to mobility, handling, balance and speed and given a grade between 0.5 and 3.5, with the highest grade going to players with high mobility.

The four players on the court



IN ACTION: Jai Waite (centre) loves the action on court.

must have a combined grade of no more than eight points.

Like any sport played at the top level, a high level of fitness is imperative.

Waite says he trains six days a week, for at least two hours per session.

New training measures mean this team is in better condition than ever before, says coach Sharman.

"This team has had a good build up.

"We have incorporated new training measures, nutrition, better video analysis, and training camps.

"The new nutritional advice

means that the players are now taking much better care of their bodies, and have changed their eating habits.

"Urinary tract infections are always a danger and these new steps have reduced the risk of these infections."

The New Zealand national championships played last weekend were disappointing for the coach.

The best performed New Zealand team was Canterbury, who lost by one point to one of the two Australian teams that came to compete.

The Auckland team came fourth, but the losses are not the

end of the world.

"This competition was only a small part of the build-up to Athens," says Sharman.

"We now have a few things we can look at and improve upon, but the best thing was that we came through the competition with no injuries except for a few sore wrists and bodies."

Waite says he is especially looking forward to going back to Greece.

This is not for any sentimental reasons, but rather to play good rugby, and to get away from the cold.

"It's the Paralympics. It'll just be great to be there."

## Rugby players get chance to engage in meaningful activity

by Claire Cooper and Kim Reed

A university course designed to cater for professional rugby players has begun at Eden Park.

It is a first for both Auckland University of Technology and rugby players from the Blues Super 12 and Auckland NPC teams, studying for a New Zealand Diploma in Business.

Playing and studying has been a big struggle for players since rugby became a professional game in the mid 1990s.

The Blues professional development manager Bryn Nyberg contacted AUT last year about creating an in-house education programme.

She says it has been proven that players who engage in

meaningful activity perform better on the field.

As a result, AUT tutors have decamped to Eden Park where special learning areas have been set up with laptop computers so players can access information online.

The course follows a summer school format and the players study one subject at a time.

Some of the players studying for the diploma are Ben Atiga, Tasesa Lavea, David Gibson, John Afoa, Angus McDonald and Derren Witcombe.

They say it is a steep learning curve for those players who have not been in school for several years, but the relaxed atmosphere and smaller class size makes a difference.

"The most challenging thing is time management," says Ben Atiga. "Our schedule always changes. But it's good to have a challenge outside of rugby."

While rugby is their number one priority, the players agree that it's important to have something to fall back on.

"I'm definitely more determined to learn," says John Afoa.

Nyberg says in the past players generally didn't become rugby professionals until later in life when they had a solid career to fall back on after rugby.

"Without an in-house concept, it was more or less going to be a lost cause. AUT's involvement and commitment has made this possible.

"The solution is to get these guys the knowledge to maximize their careers once rugby is over so they can look after themselves.

"When a player has all aspects of his life under control, he is able to give opportunities such as All Black selection all he has," says Nyberg.

AUT business lecturer Mac Vao-Iva is teaching the organisation and management paper to the players.

"I find out about their culture and interests outside of rugby. I play games with them relative to their skills.

"But most importantly, there's a lot of laughter."



STUDYING: (From left), John Afoa, tutor Mac Vao-Iva and Ben Atiga.

## World cup triathlon coming soon to NZ

by Josinta Tillett

Cities around New Zealand are bidding to host the World Cup Triathlon event in November 2005.

The grand prix event of the triathlon circuit will bring many benefits to the host city, which is why 14 councils have shown an interest.

World Cup bid project manager Richard Lindroos says the event is made for TV and will attract world-wide audiences.

"This is very good for New Zealand which is particularly strong in sport at the moment," Lindroos says.

The event will attract around 70 male and 70 female elite athletes.

There will also be an age-group race which will be designed to attract a large number of competitors of all levels.

He says the event would cost around \$750,000 to host.

"The councils need to be realistic. The cost is huge," he says.

Paul Herron, events co-ordinator at Auckland City Council, says the council is still considering whether or not it wants to hold the event.

"I'd love to have it here, but we need to know what the benefits are," he says.

Events co-ordinator at North Shore City Council, Paul Dunphy, says the council is put-



TOP ATHLETES: Coming to NZ.

ting up its hand.

"Our facilities are fine, and we'd have community support.

"We want to try and attract high-calibre athletes," he says.

There are a number of criteria the councils must meet in order to hold the event.

All councils must go through a tender process.

Criteria include having a suitable racing area, the money to host it, an ability to control traffic — and even good weather.

Triathlon New Zealand has been planning for this event since 2003.

It says the event will be held in the same city for three years.

"There's no point in just a one-off because that won't help anyone," says Lindroos.

It's up to the city councils of New Zealand to prove they have what it takes to host the event.