

Silver for Boccia paralympian

by Owen Hembry

Papatoetoe's Ross Flood has returned from the Athens Paralympics with New Zealand's first ever medal in the sport of Boccia.

Flood's four-man team won a silver medal after beating world champions Spain in the semi-finals but losing narrowly to Portugal in the final.

Boccia, a cross between indoor bowls and petanque, is designed primarily for people with moderate to severe disabilities such as spina bifida and cerebral palsy.

Flood says it felt like the whole world was at Athens in "a celebration of life".

Winning a silver medal is the pinnacle of his career, he says.

"Especially achieving the feat in Athens — the home of the Olympics. It was a privilege just to be there, and then to get a medal, well it was just the ultimate."

Flood says he is proud of the way the team played in a very tough Boccia competition.

Controlling nerves became part of the battle, he says.

"To combat this we convinced ourselves that we were just playing in Pukekohe, which is where we mostly trained together. That seemed to work as we relaxed and enjoyed the atmosphere."

Hard work and belief in each other was the secret to the team's success, Flood says.

"Over a long period of time we built up a trust in each other's abilities and in the end we went out and did the damage. I think that was the biggest satisfaction

— to see the team grow in confidence."

Flood, 52, a leading international player, has represented New Zealand at tournaments in New York, Argentina, Sydney and Portugal but says Athens was definitely his last throw.

"My sister made the observation that I've made more retirement announcements than an Italian opera singer, but this time I mean it."

"I want to retire at the top. I don't want to go past my sell-by date."

Flood says he struggled with training last year, but head coach Trevor Jenkinson convinced him that he had one more competitive year left in him.

"Without him there we would have been short on experience," says Jenkinson.

"I just think the other guys might have cracked without Ross there looking after them."

Jenkinson says success in Athens should rank New Zealand in the world's top three but Flood's retirement means maintaining this position will be a challenge.

But Jenkinson says success in Athens will encourage the next generation of players.

Flood may turn to coaching in the future, but says his first priority is a writing career he began aged 13 covering rugby matches for the *Manukau Courier*.

Flood has written for *NZ Disabled* magazine, was an editor of *Cerebral Palsy Review* and worked as a radio copywriter.

He says he always uses his humour when dealing with seri-



PHOTO: OWEN HEMBRY

PROUD: Ross Flood displays his Athens Paralympic silver medal.

ous issues such as disability. "I think humour is quite important to get the message across. If you get too serious it turns people off."

A celebratory gathering of the South Auckland club had Flood

at the head of the table with silver medal in pride of place.

On one side of the medal is a message written in braille.

When asked what it says he replies: "Probably bugger off you old bugger."

Gaelic football shines

by Tiana Miocevich

Beating Australia in any sport is an achievement in itself for New Zealand — but for an Auckland Gaelic football team, their success is even sweeter.

A team of 20 players arrived home from Melbourne last week after placing third in the Australasian Gaelic football Minors tournament.

Coach Jimmy Connolly says the team performed well, despite stiff competition.

"We won every game in the tournament until the semi-finals, but they combined two teams in the semis, New South Wales and Victoria, against us."

"We had the winning way, but in the semi finals we didn't kick the way we should have."

Gaelic football is hugely popular in Australia where the rules and style are similar to Aussie Rules football.

But in New Zealand the sport is still relatively unknown and even though it is gaining ground, Connolly says it's got a long way to go.

"It'll never take over rugby in terms of popularity in New Zealand."

But he says Gaelic football is a good sport for all codes to pick up.

"If you're good at one, you're good at all," he says.

Rugby greats Zinzan Brooke and Robin Brooke and All White Ivan Vicolich all played Gaelic football.

And it seems New Zealanders are making their mark in the Australian-dominated sport with a number of players selected for the Australasian team of the tournament.

A mixture of seasoned players and rookies, as well as Irish and non-Irish were selected: David Carmody, Andrew McDaid, John McGrinder, Martin Connolly and Evaan Miocevich, all from West Auckland.

David Carmody also picked up the Player of the Tournament.

Connolly has more than 30 years involvement in Gaelic football in New Zealand and says he's been a fan of the sport most of his life.

"I started playing Gaelic football when I was about five years of age. I come from a place called Galway in Ireland — it's huge over there."

In Gaelic football, teams of 15 players kick, bounce and pass a round ball.

A keeper defends the goal, which resembles a rugby goal post.

Teams score three points if they score a goal underneath the cross-bar and one point if they kick it over the cross-bar.

The popularity of Gaelic football has not gone unnoticed in Auckland with club competition now underway and growing numbers of people wanting to sign up to play competitively and socially.

Connolly has been taking his minors team to the Australasian tournament for 17 years — but he says it's now time to hang up his hat.

"Well that's what I say but other people tell me different," he smiles.

Futsal making a name for itself

by Kelly McAuliffe

Futsal, a low-profile sport in New Zealand, is enjoying rapid growth following the national team's success at this year's Oceania Qualifying Tournament.

The five-a-side indoor version of soccer is widely recognised almost everywhere else in the world, but in New Zealand is very much a minority sport, with only one club — Auckland's East City — officially fielding teams under the Futsal organisation's banner.

However, Gaye Powell, head of the New Zealand delegation at the tournament, notes a huge growth in futsal since the men's team finished second at the World Cup regional qualifiers, held in Canberra in July.

"Now everyone wants to get on the bandwagon. This year we've had the most teams at East City than ever before."

We're having to turn people and teams away because we simply don't have the time slots or resources to accommodate them."

Futsal began in Uruguay in 1930, from street kids playing five-a-side soccer in the streets or anywhere they could find a patch to play.

The term derives from the Spanish or Portuguese word for "soccer", futbol or futebol and the French or Spanish word for "indoor", salon or sala.

The game gained rapid popularity, especially in Brazil, which



ANDREW GWILLIAM

is today the futsal hub of the world.

The skills developed in the game are often compared to the world-famous style the Brazilians display on the outdoor, full-sized field because a considerable amount of ball control is needed on the basketball-sized indoor court.

A thriving sport overseas under the auspices of FIFA, fut-

sal is played in North, Central and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania.

The game's history in New Zealand dates back to 1987.

The East City club was formed in Auckland's eastern suburbs and set up as a derivative under New Zealand Soccer.

The club's longest playing member, Andrew Gwilliam, says a lot has changed since those early days.

"Back then it wasn't like 'indoor soccer' as it is today. There were no set teams, the rules weren't that great and there were no uniforms."

"Now there is a proper club set-up, trained referees, uniforms and a scheduled indoor season to fit in with the outdoor soccer season," he says.

"If you look at the kids playing these days, their skill level is a lot higher than what mine was at that age."

Gwilliam, 20, is one of the youngest players in the New Zealand men's team and says it is hard to be competitive when they have such limited resources.

"In Australia, they have a lot of sponsors and funding."

"Their team is about three times the size of ours. They have a doctor, a physio and about three assistant coaches who travel around with them."

For the recent qualifiers, the New Zealand team applied to get sports grants from various trusts and pub charities.

Each team member then had

to pay an amount over and above what was raised.

Gwilliam says that to play at this level, dedication and a love for the game is definitely needed.

"I like playing for New Zealand and I like playing Aussie, but it's hard when most of us have jobs and have to fork out from our own pockets," he says.

"The fact that we don't get much support means we're not going to take it as seriously as perhaps the Aussies."

"And that's frustrating because we do want to be competitive."

Elias Billeh, one of two goalkeepers in the New Zealand team, believes the team has got what it takes to become even more competitive with further training.

Powell agrees.

"If we had had a professional coach, I believe we could have done even better at the tournament," she says.

"I think the grit of the players is what got us through."

New Zealand Soccer recently came under new management and Powell hopes that Futsal New Zealand will subsequently see some changes.

"We're just going to hang in there and see what happens. It would be great if NZ Soccer could get behind us. We hope they will be prepared to put a bit more time and money into it as the skills taught in futsal will benefit soccer as a whole."