

5th October, 2021

Neil Martin, Olympian & Matt Levy OAM, Paralympian

“Behind the scenes of the Olympics & Paralympics – Munich to Tokyo”

Matt Levy has represented Australia in swimming at 5 Paralympics, from 2004 to 2020(2021). Neil Martin swam at the 1972 Munich Olympics and attended Sydney and Beijing (whilst also being President of Swimming Australia). Together they treated us to an athlete’s perspective on these global games spanning 50 years.

Neil compared the low security at Munich to the increasingly heightened level ever since. Initially Munich was very low key, with German officials keen to provide a happy friendly atmosphere in contrast to Berlin in 1936. Neil even had a friendly chat with the Chancellor Willie Brandt as he wandered around the venue. Several coaches and others gained entry to the athletes’ village with forged passes. Indeed this was the means by which the terrorists entered the Israelis’ building (adjacent to the Australians’), causing murder and mayhem in the final week. A further example, extraordinary even then, but utterly impossible now, was that Neil was able to fly to Paris (on the same morning as the terrorist attack with troops swarming the compound), then onto London to compete in other swim events, then return to Munich in time for the closing ceremony a week later, just using his Olympic pass instead of his passport.

At Sydney 2000, Neil had the thrill of being a volunteer, being name placard carrier for Morocco at the opening and closing ceremonies, plus NOC assistant to the Great Britain team.

At Beijing 2008, the organisation was remarkable, including with regional factories closed to enable clear skies, extreme security, and some venues only just completed in time. Neil was an official, enabling him to see all 8 gold medals won by Michael Phelps.

Neil reflected on Australia’s medal haul over the period he was involved. An important associated factor was the growth in government funding, from negligible prior to 1992, to a huge commitment for Sydney 2000, and then ongoing strong funding especially for core sports thereafter (\$130 million in 20/21, and commitment at this level for the next 3 years until the next Olympics). Funding is designated by government to sport organisations, not from AOC as commonly thought. There is a close correlation between funding

and medals, with relative lack of success in the 80s being stark. Australia's best medal performance was in Sydney (where a lot of funding was also given to relatively minor sports) and Athens. Swimming got 21 medals in Tokyo, other sports in total got 19. This ratio has been common for the Australian team.

Neil then welcomed Matt Levy, who gave us background on his personal challenges, arising from his cerebral palsy, 15 weeks premature birth, vision impairment, etc, which have required almost 50 operations (including replacement about every 5 years of a shunt which drains excess fluid from his brain).

He took up swimming as therapy when he was about 9, initially at the Allambie Heights pool of the Cerebral Palsy Alliance (then called the Spastic Centre), where he was taught new strokes and breathing techniques, both very difficult for his condition.

He recounted the initial challenges of travelling with limited eyesight by public transport to his school, St Andrews Cathedral School in central Sydney. The school was very supportive of him throughout. Increasingly he became hooked on swimming, revelling in achieving personal bests.

His achievements led to his selection at age 17 to the Athens Paralympics, where machine gun toting guards were a scary introduction for him to the event. His vision impairment led to getting lost for over 2 hours in the village, just one of many challenges he has had to encounter in his career.

9 medals over his 5 Paralympics are a testament to his skill, dedication, and commitment.

Tokyo provided an extra dimension with the covid precautions and protocols, including being in Nth Queensland away from family and friends for 9 weeks before flying to Tokyo. He described the daily covid tests, village life isolated among only the Australian team and support staff, limited food choice, no crowds, precautions on buses to/from venues, etc, then 2 weeks quarantine on return.

He noted the Paralympics (so called to reflect the "parallel games") have raised awareness of the challenges and the skills of these athletes and their journeys in reaching these levels of achievement. In Matt's case this can be seen not only in

his successes in the pool, but also academically including being awarded an MBA earlier this year, being an executive with Westpac, and writing a remarkable book of his application, resiliency, dedication, attitudes, philosophy etc that have led to his extraordinary achievements.

His book "*Keeping your head above water : Inspirational insights from a champion*" was released in 2020, and is available through his website <https://mattlevoam.com.au/shop/>

There is much more which can be heard on the recording, which is on the Probus website.

After Q&A, Bill Butterell thanked the speakers for sharing their personal experiences and insights in the Olympics and Paralympics. He amusingly speculated about TV ratings if athletes these days performed nude, like their ancient Olympian forebears.

PJ