From Trauma to Rehabilitation and Elite Sport:

The Foundation Years of Disability Sport in Victoria

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Preface

It tended to happen in an instant. One moment you were healthy and able, the next moment your legs were fully or partially paralysed. Kevin Coombs was accidentally shot, Bruno Moretti’s spine was dislocated while he was being delivered, Michael Dow and Elaine Schreiber were infected and then paralysed by the polio virus, while as an adult Robin Paisley crashed his aeroplane, Alan Robertson was crushed in an industrial accident, and Charles Ikstrums, Margaret Lester, Robin Lucas, Ivan Risojevic, Bob Thornton and many others were involved in car accidents that left them as paraplegics. All these moments were key turning points in the lives of each individual and their families. In a wider sense, though, all these incidents became significant aspects of the story of disability sport in Victoria, and thus are vital parts of the collective memory of the organization that provided these people with not only care and support but also the opportunity to rehabilitate through participation in sport and recreation.

The peak association responsible for providing sport and recreation opportunities for people with disabilities in Victoria, now known as ‘Disability Sport & Recreation’ (DSR), has a somewhat hidden, and not well documented, history. Since its initial formation in 1962 as the ‘Victorian Paraplegic Sports Club’, DSR has undergone a number of name changes and has suffered the inevitable vicissitudes caused by its original status as a volunteer association, subject to a chronic lack of funding and an often low community profile. While some attempts have been made to chronicle the noteworthy achievements of related bodies such as the Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association of Victoria (initially formed in 1957), and to highlight the
accomplishments of several prominent Paralympians, there has been no systematic effort to establish an authoritative foundation narrative that draws on the oral testimony of those surviving individuals who played important roles in the establishment of the Victorian Paraplegic Sports Club just over 50 years ago. To this end, DSR commissioned the authors to complete a project based on interviews with a number of the acknowledged ‘founders’ of the original organization, with the main purpose of the project to map how sport and disability coalesced in highly visible ways during the decades between the late 1950s and the early 1980s.

In keeping with the ‘foundation’ nature of the narrative, therefore, we have endeavoured to document all relevant sources of information and indicated in the footnotes where there are any known discrepancies. We have also included an Appendix containing recommendations for future actions, recognizing that history is never static, new narratives evolve, and that aspects of the heritage of DSR will not only continue to be uncovered but will need to be preserved in an accessible and sustainable manner for future generations.

It is important to note that the nomenclature associated with disability sport is a highly contested field. Like a number of other Australian scholars, we recognize the broad spectrum of language, including medicalized expressions such as ‘able-bodied’ and ‘nondisabled’, but we have chosen, by and large, to refer to ‘disability sport’ and/or ‘disabled sport’. This is partly for reasons of convenience and aesthetics, but largely because these are terms which resonate with the name of the commissioning organization.
Chapter One

Introduction: From Trauma to Hope

Towards the end of 1953 two shocking accidents drastically altered the lives of a boy and a young man. Both were left unable to move their legs. Both were pitied by many and considered grievously unfortunate. Yet both found themselves on the cusp of great changes in the treatment, rehabilitation and opportunities available for those living with paraplegia or quadriplegia. So great were these changes that both would later look back and call the accidents that befell them ‘fortunate’.

Kevin Coombs was a Wotjobaluk child living with his aunty’s family in Balranald, New South Wales, when the accident happened. Aged twelve, Coombs was enjoying the school holidays with his cousins on Friday, 4 September 1953. They were out by the Murrumbidgee River, seeking to shoot some rabbits that they could then sell. Coombs was sitting on the river bank when one of his cousins playfully picked up his gun and pulled the trigger, unaware that the gun was loaded. The bullet hit Coombs’ spine, paralysing him instantly. His uncle was able to get him quickly to the Swan Hill hospital where the surgeons saved Coombs’ life, but his prognosis was not promising.

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1 Brief accounts of the accident were published in ‘3 Shot In Separate Incidents’, Sydney Morning Herald, 5 September 1953, p. 12; ‘Three Shot in NSW Sydney Sept. 4’, Advertiser (Adelaide), 5 September 1953, p. 1; and ‘Two Men and Boy in Shooting Cases’, Barrier Miner (Broken Hill), 5 September 1953, p. 12.

Six weeks later Robin Paisley faced a prognosis that was even more dire. A 26 year old Scotsman who had migrated to Australia in 1947, Paisley had worked as a jackaroo and was now managing a sheep station at Holbrook. But Paisley also enjoyed other pursuits that were more thrilling and dangerous. On Sunday, 18 November 1953, Paisley flew a Tiger Moth aeroplane from Moorabbin airport into restricted airspace at Lysterfield (in Melbourne’s south-east) where he hit power-lines, and then crashed into the marshy land below. Paisley and his passenger Rhonda Rutherford were pinned in the cockpit and with ‘jaws of life’ yet to be invented it took the rescuers 90 minutes to transfer them to waiting ambulances that received a police escort to take them to the Alfred Hospital. The urgency was needed, for while Rutherford was in a satisfactory condition, Paisley had a broken spine to go with a broken leg and ankle. Indeed, Paisley’s injuries were so severe that he was only given three days to live.

Paisley soon outlived this prognosis and was transferred to the Austin Hospital – the medical destination for paraplegics, quadriplegics and many other so-called ‘incurables’. It was, as Geoff Luke recalled, a grim place. A physiotherapist at the Austin from 1950 until 1966, Luke would become a key figure in the life of Coombs

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4 For further details see ‘Hit High Tensions Wire: Two Injured in Plane Crash’, *Queensland Times* (Ipswich), 19 October 1953, p. 1; and ‘Plane Hits Wires: Two Hurt in Moth's Wild Dive’, *Argus*, 19 October 1953, p. 1 (An image of the crash site was published on p. 7).
5 ‘Two Injured When Plane Hit Wires’, *Age*, 19 October 1953, p. 1 (An image of the crash site was published on p. 3); and ‘Two Hurt as Plane Hits Wires’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 October 1953, p. 1.
8 This and the following details are from an interview with Geoff Luke, 1 May 2012.
and many other paraplegics and quadriplegics, most of whom referred to him affectionately as ‘Brother Rat’. As a serviceman in the Navy for much of World War II, Luke had seen and experienced many difficult things, but he still painted a confronting picture of the dismal, almost hopeless, conditions at the Austin in 1950:

Upon entering one was presented with a vista of chronic and incurable patients mixed up with long-term lesions, pulmonary TB [tuberculosis], bone TB, sometimes both lesions, and completely frozen arthritic conditions. ‘Chronic and incurable patients’ was on our letterhead - they won’t show you that one now. I remember one medical officer saying of a young man in hospital with TB of the spine, that there should be a sign over the door, ‘Abandon hope all ye as ye perish in the inferno’.

The first few years of Luke’s time at the Austin Hospital saw improvements in the treatment of conditions such as tuberculosis and infected spines, but by 1953 there was little knowledge at the Austin or elsewhere in Australia regarding the treatment let alone rehabilitation of patients with paraplegia (or quadriplegia).9 ‘You can see why we weren’t thinking of sport … [when we were still asking] “Could we get them out of bed? Will they live?”’ Perhaps as a consequence, Luke described people with spinal cord injury in the 1950s as ‘rather a sad group’. He suggested they were ‘demoralised’ and ‘depressed’ and that they ‘Died slowly, with each medical problem mounting up’.10

At Swan Hill it was even worse for Coombs. As he noted, ‘they didn’t know how to look after paraplegics like they do today. After they washed me in the morning, they


wouldn’t touch me until the next morning, so consequently I was laying in me own mess and stuff like that’. The lack of movement meant that Coombs soon developed ‘a great big pressure sore’ on his coccyx and he was sent to the Royal Children’s hospital in Melbourne for treatment. He recalled:

I’ll never forget this as long as I live. I was laying on me stomach in the Children’s Hospital, when it was in Carlton, Canning Street Carlton, and the nurse took me dressing down. She just threw up, and then collapsed after pulling me dressing down, and I’m laying on me stomach, and I’m thinking to myself, ‘Geez, I’ve got a bit of work to do here’. Then they did some skin grafts and I laid on me stomach for about 18 months, and that was horrific in itself, you know, and not seeing another black face for two years.

Like Paisley, Coombs ended up at the Austin (although in a Children’s Ward), quite possibly around the time when Paisley was leaving the hospital. Paisley had been diagnosed as an ‘incomplete’ paraplegic who was paralysed from the waist down and was told by the orthopaedic surgeon that he would never walk again.11 He was one of the lucky ones healthy enough to leave hospital after seven months of treatment, but he wanted to further his rehabilitation and was determined to do everything he could to walk. The possibilities for care in Australia were limited, but somehow Paisley had found out about the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Buckinghamshire, England. After obtaining a letter from his orthopaedic surgeon and using money from the savings he had set aside to buy a house, Paisley boarded a ship heading to England.

The idea of rehabilitation for people with severe spinal injuries was a relatively new one. Prior to 1939 people with paraplegia were thought to have little chance of

surviving, and thus, as historian of the Paralympics Ian Brittain notes, ‘there is little evidence of organised efforts to develop sport for the disabled, especially those with spinal injuries’ before World War II.\(^{12}\) Many soldiers however were disabled during the war, prompting medical authorities ‘to re-evaluate traditional methods of rehabilitation, which were not satisfactorily addressing the medical and psychological needs of the large number of soldiers disabled in combat’.\(^{13}\)

In the mid-1940s, Dr Ludwig Guttmann, a neurologist who had escaped to England from Nazi Germany, was asked by the British government to set up a Spinal Injuries Unit at Stoke Mandeville to treat the expected large number of war wounded.\(^{14}\) On arrival, he acknowledged that ‘those with spinal cord injuries were thought of as hopeless cripples’, and he noted the poor psychological state which seemed to plague such individuals.\(^{15}\) However, as Christine Mitchell has observed, Guttmann responded to these defeatist attitudes by ‘initiating a treatment and rehabilitation program comprising specialised medical and nursing care, physiotherapy and occupational therapy’.\(^{16}\) Most famously, Guttmann also believed that sport could play a vital role in rehabilitation, and soon his patients were playing a number of sports including darts, snooker, punch-ball, skittles, archery and wheelchair basketball.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{13}\) Brittain, ‘The Evolution of the Paralympic Games’, p. 20.


\(^{15}\) Cited in Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 1.


\(^{17}\) Brittain, ‘The Evolution of the Paralympic Games’, p. 20.
As Nikki Wedgwood points out, though, there is more to the ‘back story’. Namely, it was the competitive nature of the (mostly) young, male patients themselves that initially inspired Guttmann, when they attempted to devise their own wheelchair sports.\(^{18}\) It was only then, notes Wedgwood, that Guttmann began to pioneer the use of sport ‘… in the physical, psychological and social rehabilitation of paraplegic patients’.\(^{19}\) Soon sport was a mandatory part of the regimen of patients at Stoke Mandeville. As Guttmann’s secretary, Joan Scruton recalls, ‘They had to do a sport. It was part of the treatment. It was not a question of would you like to do archery; no, it was part of the treatment, like taking their medicine, or doing physiotherapy’.\(^{20}\) Indeed, Guttmann himself later wrote that sport was not only ‘invaluable in restoring the disabled person’s physical fitness’ but also helped ‘facilitate and accelerate … social reintegration or integration’.\(^{21}\) While academics such as Wedgwood have deftly challenged Guttmann’s notion that sport has been a panacea for the social exclusion of disabled persons, it is also important to acknowledge the political, social and historical complexity in which disability sport has evolved.\(^{22}\)

Whatever his inspiration might have been, Guttmann was certainly the central personality behind the first sports meetings for those with spinal injuries. It began with archery, a rare sport at which people with paraplegia could ‘compete on equal

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\(^{19}\) Wedgwood, ‘Hahn Versus Guttmann’, p. 130.


\(^{21}\) Cited in Wedgwood, ‘Hahn Versus Guttmann’, p. 130.

\(^{22}\) Wedgwood, ‘Hahn Versus Guttmann’, p. 138.
terms with their able-bodied counterparts’. Teams from Stoke Mandeville visited able-bodied archery clubs which Brittain argues assisted in breaking down ‘barriers between the community and the patients and also meant that once discharged from hospital, the paraplegic had access to society through a local archery club’.

Eager to showcase the success of his rehabilitative methods, Guttmann organised a demonstration of archery between two teams to coincide with the opening ceremony of the 1948 Olympic Games. Although a rather modest affair, with only 13 men and three women competing, it set the scene for an annual sports carnival that became known as the ‘Stoke Mandeville Games for the Paralysed’, and would develop into the unofficial world championships for those with spinal injuries.

A year later, a second Games was held. Proudly labelled the ‘Grand Festival of Paraplegic Sport’, these Games attracted seven teams with 37 individuals taking part. Yet as Brittain points out, ‘with the exception of the archers from the Polish Hospital at Penley every competitor had, at some time, been a patient of Dr Guttmann’. It was at these Games that Guttmann made the now famous prediction that the Stoke Mandeville Games would eventually become the paraplegic equivalent of the Olympic Games.

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25 Steadward and Peterson, Paralympics, pp. 22-23.
As Guttmann’s prediction made clear, he had firm intentions to make the Games international. This dream started to be realized in 1952 when a team of four paraplegics from the Military Rehabilitation Centre, Aardenburg, in the Netherlands, attended the Stoke Mandeville Games, leading to what is considered the first international wheelchair games.28 The event drew an increasing number of overseas competitors, and started attracting international attention and comparisons to the Olympics. By 1953 news of what was happening at Stoke Mandeville was reaching Australia with a number of articles profiling the seemingly miraculous cures and sporting activities of the patients and the Games already being referred to as the ‘Paralympics’.29

Perhaps it was these media reports that drew Paisley’s attention, or maybe his doctors had read about Guttmann’s treatments in the medical literature. Regardless, news of what was occurring at Stoke Mandeville was enough to set Paisley on his way.30 Nonetheless, when he arrived he found that the demand for the spinal rehabilitation services was so great that there was a two-year waiting period for beds at the hospital. Determined to still get some care after travelling so far, Paisley rented a room at a nearby inn and became a day-patient at Stoke Mandeville before later getting a bed at the Hospital when a space opened up.

30 The following details are drawn from an interview with Janet Paisley, 12 December 2013, unless otherwise stated.
The conditions were likely rudimentary. Dr Robert Steadward, later to become president of the International Paralympic Committee, remembers his shock when he arrived at the Hospital with the Canadian team in 1971: ‘When we got there they had one small building … some offices … a small 25-metre pool, and a small gymnasium … There were no facilities for track and field except an open field for throwing the javelin and discus’. 31 The accommodation was also problematic. ‘The residences for the athletes and coaches were old wooden World War II huts … There was no privacy whatsoever … a few cotton curtains to separate bathtubs from toilets’. 32 Although Steadward also bemoans the fact that there were no facilities to encourage socializing between participants, he does suggest that camaraderie was fostered when athletes would wheel down the roads of Stoke Mandeville every night in order to visit the nearest pub ‘for some fish and chips, to play darts, and [to] have a few pints of beer’. 33

Previously a jackaroo, it is unlikely that the basic conditions bothered Paisley. Instead, as an active sportsman from before his accident, Paisley enjoyed the focus on games as a key part of the rehabilitation process. He excelled at archery – the signature sport of Guttmann’s treatment due to the way it helped strengthen the upper body – becoming captain of the Stoke Mandeville Hospital team. Not only was he able to walk again, Paisley even learned to fly once more. The extent of Paisley’s rehabilitation was clear from the itinerary of the travels he undertook after leaving the hospital – ‘three months hitch hiking through Spain and North Africa and one month

31 Cited in Steadward and Peterson, Paralympics, p. 29.
33 Cited in Steadward and Peterson, Paralympics, p. 30.
skiing in Austria’.\textsuperscript{34} When Paisley arrived back in Melbourne in October 1956 he was able to walk off the *Southern Cross* ocean liner and express his intention to spend as much time as possible flying while undertaking an accountancy degree.\textsuperscript{35}

Paisley was keen to see something in Melbourne similar to what the *Argus* by now described as ‘the world famous paraplegic centre’ at Stoke Mandeville. However, when he returned to the Austin Hospital he would have found it already in the midst of change. Around the world people had been reading about the approach that Guttmann had instituted and some were seeking a comparable accomplishment. In December 1954, only months after Paisley had sailed for England, Australia’s first Paraplegic Unit was established at the Royal Perth Rehabilitation Hospital at Shenton Park.\textsuperscript{36} Meanwhile at the Austin Hospital in Melbourne the Medical Superintendent Dr Tom Patrick was also seeking to broaden the focus of the hospital from saving lives to also assisting the rehabilitation of patients. Patrick had started at the Austin in 1952 and understood something of what it was like to live with a chronic condition for he was suffering from a severe kidney condition.\textsuperscript{37}

As Luke remembers it, Patrick was quick to get his staff researching how they could develop rehabilitative services at the Austin: ‘Nice bloke, gosh he was a good fellow. God, the things they did he knew nothing about it. We were all learning’.\textsuperscript{38} Everyone, the ‘physio, social worker, senior nurse, resident MO [Medical Officer] and Tom

\textsuperscript{34} ‘The Flying Man Who Won’t Quit’, *Argus*, 17 October 1956, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{35} ‘The Flying Man Who Won’t Quit’, *Argus*, 17 October 1956, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{36} Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{37} Gault and Lucas, *A Century of Compassion*, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{38} Interview with Geoff Luke, 1 May 2012.
Patrick, sat down and looked at our material. We’d read the lovely books, you know, we’d got a smattering and seen a couple of films from overseas of the wonderful things done elsewhere’. 39

Soon paraplegics became a key focus of the Austin Hospital. By the mid-1950s there were around 60 to 70 paralysed patients and Patrick and his staff ‘believed that many of them could be rehabilitated’. 40 In 1956 a major step forward occurred with the establishment of a Spinal Unit that was immediately recognized by the Victorian Government’s Hospitals and Charities Commission as the Victorian centre ‘for such services’. 41 As Patrick noted in the Austin Hospital’s Annual Report, ‘The major need has proved to be the care of spinal injuries, and under a team of highly skilled team of medical specialists splendid results have been achieved in the recovery of patients who, without the benefits of this service, would have had little hope for the future’. 42

In this context, Mitchell records ‘Paralysed people were becoming increasingly active and mobile’, and Luke, recalled the increasingly positive mood:

> morale was slowly building up … new patients would see others up and around, mobile, walking around on crutches, wheeling themselves to toilets, getting in and out of the bath, getting down on the floor and up again … those who didn’t see any hope, now did.’ 43

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40 Gault and Lucas, A Century of Compassion, p. 140.
41 Gault and Lucas, A Century of Compassion, p. 141.
42 As cited in Gault and Lucas, A Century of Compassion, p. 141.
43 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 2.
The changes were made in time to help Coombs, though he had almost died before they came in. After finally recovering from his bed-sore and associated surgery and skin grafts, Coombs became afflicted with peritonitis – severe inflammation of his abdomen that was poisoning his system:

I got peritonitis and that nearly killed me … I got the pain and I just went very quiet, didn’t eat or anything, didn’t move. I wasn’t interested in life. I thought, ‘Well I got shot, and then I had to lay on me stomach for 12 months, and then this is happening to me’. I was just about to throw the towel in; I thought ‘I’ve had it, I’ve had enough of this’. 44

Fortunately one of the nurses at the Austin – Sister Thomas – was very well connected and contacted Pastor Doug Nicholls and asked him to come and visit the ailing Coombs. A famous Aboriginal footballer, boxer and Christian minister, Nicholls would later be the first Indigenous Australian to be knighted and was also appointed the Governor of South Australia. 45 Nicholls answered Sister Thomas’ call and brought along his son-in-law Stuart Murray who just happened to be the uncle of Coombs who had taken him to the hospital after the initial shooting accident. As Coombs recalled:

Sister Thomas was very well known and knew a lot of people in Melbourne. She got in touch with Sir Doug, and she said, ‘Come out and talk to this lad. You know, because all he’s doing is putting his head under the blankets and wanting to sleep, and he didn’t want to eat, didn’t want to do anything’. Anyway, so Doug and Stuart Murray came out and got stuck into me, and they told me, ‘What are you

44 This and the following material is from an interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012.
doing laying around? Get up and have a go, don’t give in’. From then on, I did give it a go, and haven’t given in.

Coombs’ recovery coincided with the inception of the Austin’s Spinal Unit which helped make life more interesting and enjoyable: ‘I started to build up in strength and I was pretty healthy, and being competitive when we would do the program out there, the sports program, we used to play a lot of basketball’. Indeed, basketball and the other sporting opportunities that came out of the Austin Hospital’s new focus on rehabilitation would become a key reason why Coombs would later look back at his spinal injury as something that could be considered a ‘fortunate accident’.46

Paisley also felt somehow fortunate to have been injured the way he had. It had given him a renewed sense of the preciousness of life and of the importance of getting the most out of it. After obtaining his accountancy degree in the Northern Territory, he came back to Melbourne and continued to be involved with the Austin Hospital’s Spinal Unit. Paisley would soon meet his future wife Janet at one of the Spinal Unit’s events, and sport would become so central to their life that they would later buy a house beside a golf course. But while in 1956 the future was looking much brighter for Paisley and Coombs than it was at the end of 1953, the development of sporting opportunities for those with spinal injuries in Victoria was only just beginning.

46 A Fortunate Accident is the title of Coombs’ autobiography. Though Coombs had serious misgivings when he was first notified of the title, he agreed to it after reflecting on all that had occurred in his life due to the accident.
Chapter Two

A Momentous Year

Bruno Moretti had been living with partial paralysis since he entered the world. He was a twin, but an unexpected one. His mother had given birth to his brother, and then four hours later went into contractions again. Moretti’s parents called the doctor back and, as Moretti himself relates, the doctor discovered that, ‘I was there. So they pulled me out, and unfortunately dislocated my spine, so that’s how I became a paraplegic’. Moretti grew up living at home while under the care of the Royal Children’s Hospital. He used a wooden wheelchair to get around, and amongst other things, sold newspapers on a street corner near the then family home in Kew.

When Moretti turned sixteen, his care was transferred to the Austin Hospital. It was 1957, a momentous time for the hospital’s Spinal Unit. In one of the biggest developments, Ludwig Guttmann himself visited the Austin Hospital in February and Moretti was one of the patients he saw. Guttmann diagnosed Moretti as an ‘incomplete’ paraplegic, confirming that the Austin was the most appropriate place to care for him and assist in his rehabilitation.

During his visit Guttmann offered advice to Tom Patrick and his staff, suggesting the need for ‘more occupational therapy and sport’ and further sporting facilities, including the provision of a swimming pool. Most notably, Guttmann ‘stressed the necessity for the appointment of a full-time Medical Director of the Spinal Unit to

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47 This and the following details are drawn from an interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
48 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 2; Gault and Lucas, A Century of Compassion, p. 141.
direct and co-ordinate the various phases of its work'. 49 As part of his trip, Guttmann also ‘met with business people and demonstrated to them that paralysed people were able to play a useful role in the community’. 50

Luke, however, was not so impressed with Guttmann. He acknowledged the amazing developments at Stoke Mandeville, but it seemed to Luke that Guttmann’s focus remained on paraplegics and archery, whereas Luke wanted to also help rehabilitate quadriplegics and to look at how other sports might also be useful. 51 For Luke, the more inspiring event of 1957 was an October trip to Perth for an inaugural Paraplegic Games. These Games were organized by the Paraplegic Unit at the Royal Perth Hospital and served as a trial prior to the selection of a team for the International Stoke Mandeville Games.

Luke took with him three patients – Bruno Moretti, Bob Gordon, and Graeme Philip. 52 Moretti had been at the Austin for less than a year but he was already benefiting from the new Spinal Unit. Within months the Austin staff had Moretti ‘mobile walking on crutches’ and ‘motoring around’. 53 Yet sport was still an emerging focus, and neither Moretti, Gordon or Philip were experienced enough to win selection to travel to Stoke Mandeville.

49 Cited in Gault and Lucas, A Century of Compassion, p. 141.
50 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 2.
52 The names of these three patients have only rarely been chronicled correctly, but in interviews both Geoff Luke and Bruno Moretti confirmed that these were the three athletes who travelled from the Austin Hospital to Perth. Interview with Geoff Luke, 1 May 2012; and interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
53 Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
Moretti returned home keen to continue playing sports and developing his skills. Luke was similarly inspired and returned to Melbourne eager to see if he could do better:

I saw a Unit as it should be. Sport right up, active sports, chaps all happy, keen. Not so much the javelin and archery, they were the wheelchair boys. They were the masters of wheelchair basketball. We saw really high active people who had been going for a long time, a better run Unit, not bogged down.  

Luke was particularly impressed by the way the Perth Spinal Unit focussed on weight-lifting using a barbell attached to ropes strung out from the rafters. It seemed to Luke a more promising method for developing upper-body strength than archery, but he also thought it could be improved upon. ‘I thought that’s interesting, and I said “We’ll do better than that. This should be a good sport, bring in weight-lifting”’. On his return to Melbourne Luke got in touch with renowned ‘strong-man’ Stan Nichols who was running a gym in the city. Nichols came in and showed the paraplegics how to use cartwheel barbells in order to create a ‘giant weight-lifting’ set-up. (Years later Luke arranged for Nichols to judge para-weight-lifting at Moomba, an honour that Nichols was ‘very chuffed about’.)

Another development in 1957 that was probably informed by events in Western Australia was the formation of the Paraplegic Association of Victoria (the forerunner to the Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association of Victoria). It is unclear exactly when this formation took place or at whose instigation, despite the fact that this was later to be recognized as an important foundation event. Nonetheless, Christine Mitchell

54 This and the following details are from an interview with Geoff Luke, 1 May 2012.
astutely observes that a Paraplegic Association had been established in Western Australia earlier in the year, perhaps giving impetus to the Victorian organization.55

The original meeting of the Association was held in the Spinal Unit ward at the Austin Hospital. Graeme Philip was the chairman and Jack Kennedy the treasurer.56 Kevin Coombs was also in attendance and remembers a number of others who were involved, including Gordon Birch, Alan Franklin, Alan Robertson, Norm Scanlon, John Cugley and Robert Caddy, while Mitchell adds that ‘Some of the nursing staff, doctors, the physiotherapist, an occupational therapist and a social worker also joined’.57

Alan Robertson was one of the key driving forces behind the Paraplegic Association of Victoria. A veteran of World War II and a former quarry master who was already very active in a number of clubs and associations including the Rotary Club, Robertson had been crushed in an industrial accident at a quarry in 1956.58 With his considerable ‘know-how’ and contacts, Robertson was, in the words of Luke, ‘a tower of strength’ for the Paraplegic Association, and is generally credited as being the Association’s first president, holding office from 1957 until 1963.59 Mitchell also lauds Robertson’s leadership of the Association, noting how he increased the profile of the organization, raised funds, influenced decision-making, and, not least, took part

55 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 5.
56 Mitchell adds that ‘Technically, Graeme [Philip] was the first president, although he only held the position for about a month’. Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 5.
57 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 5. Note that ‘Alan Roberts’ and ‘Alan Robertson’ are not the same person.
59 Interview with Geoff Luke, 1 May 2012; Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 5.
as a leader or participant in numerous Paralympic sporting events both in Australia and overseas, all while raising a young family and managing his own business.\textsuperscript{60}

Moretti remembers Robertson as ‘a very good bloke’ who was passionate about sport.\textsuperscript{61} Working closely together with the Association secretary Cyril Thomas – a member of the Victorian Employee’s Federation who assisted a number of charitable organisations – Robertson made sport a key focus of the Association. ‘We met monthly’ noted Robertson in 1997, with the agenda items ‘mainly based around sport and supply of material … if there was something interesting, such as selection of a basketball team … [other members] would be there, but if [the agenda was] boring, [then] no’.\textsuperscript{62}

Later, when more patients, and health and paramedical professionals, became interested in the Association, larger meetings began to be held at Zeltner Hall, in the grounds of the Austin Hospital. Mitchell writes that discussion took place on various issues, including getting people with paraplegia back into the workforce, finding places to live after hospital discharge, getting discounts on medical equipment, and the holding of sporting events. However, in her view, ‘nothing much happened in the first couple of years’ and the Association ‘operated more like a support group, providing a morale boost for those involved’.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{60} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{61} Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
\textsuperscript{62} Cited in Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{63} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 5.
Still the turn to sport facilitated by both the Austin Hospital and the new Paraplegic Association was embraced ‘enthusiastically’ by most patients. Luke recalls that ‘With Alan Robertson and him [Thomas] you could never have got a paraplegia to say, he wasn’t into the sport’. The sports on offer moved quickly from indoor pursuits including carpet bowls and table tennis to ‘basketball and other sports from a wheelchair’, and the weightlifting organised by Luke. Wheelchair basketball was a particular focus and in January 1958 the paraplegic patients at the Austin Hospital had their first major public game – a game played against tennis stars from Australia and America that the Austin team won by a score of 15-13.

In the 1950s, international tennis was in the midst of an upheaval as the struggle between British-derived amateur notions of sport and the more commercial American alternative played itself out across the world. According to the prominent historian of sport Richard Cashman, ‘American entrepreneurs, including tennis promoter Jack Kramer and millionaire Lamar Hunt, enticed many of the celebrated Australian tennis-players to professional tennis, causing much public and media consternation’. In an attempt to win over the public to the cause of professionalism in tennis, Kramer and his cohorts would deliberately seek publicity and often involved themselves in media-grabbing stunts. It is not surprising, then, that at the height of this turmoil in tennis, soon after Australia had been stripped of its best amateur players, Kramer and his band of professional recruits, including Americans Pancho Gonzales and Ted

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64 Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 2.
Schroeder, and Australians Lew Hoad, Frank Sedgman and Ken Rosewall, played a game of wheelchair basketball against patients of the Austin Hospital in January 1958.\textsuperscript{69} Nevertheless it was a genuine coup for the Austin and both enormously exciting and a great recognition for those who played. Moretti remembers it as a ‘fantastic’ occasion. The players ‘were all great, great people, and not just because they’re top athletes. They were great people in general, and they could see what we were trying to do, and it was just fantastic’.\textsuperscript{70}

In some ways, this exhibition match was also the beginning of high-profile sporting contests between elite athletes and patients at the Austin, which set the scene for other sporting codes, especially Australian Rules, to become involved with the Hospital’s Spinal Unit, usually for charity purposes. The involvement of international tennis stars in a wheelchair basketball match must also have given impetus to those responsible for arranging participation in the Australian Paraplegic Games in 1960, and wheelchair basketball more generally.


\textsuperscript{70} Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
Chapter Three
A New Director and Sporting Competitions

Robin Lucas was travelling to Wangaratta in 1959 for a long weekend when it happened. The road was very wet and another car got a bit too close around Euroa. Lucas went off the road then ‘whipped back too quickly and did a side skid and ironically flicked onto the 100 mile post and did a triple flip’.\textsuperscript{71} While the other passengers were uninjured, Lucas finished up being a ‘para-T45’. After an initial period at the Wangaratta Base Hospital, Lucas was transferred to the Austin Hospital.

Like many others, Lucas found the initial transition to life with paralysis of the lower limbs a very difficult one. ‘It’s a bit of setback when you first get there and work out what’s going on, as you can imagine. You have pretty dark thoughts for a while’. However one of the advantages of being at a place like the Austin Hospital’s Spinal Unit was that patients were surrounded by others coming to grips with the same reality and showing that it could be done:

> Because there are other people with you in the same situation, you sort of rethink about what’s going on. Like you realize that you’re a paraplegic and there’s other people who are paraplegics and quadriplegics around you. You accept that and get on with your life. I think that’s how most of them do it which is fair enough.

Moreover, Lucas came to think of himself as relatively lucky for he arrived at the Austin Hospital only shortly before the significant changes brought in by the

\textsuperscript{71} This and the following quotations are from an interview with Robin Lucas, 3 April 2012.
incoming inaugural Medical Director of the Austin’s Spinal Unit – Dr David Cheshire.

The new position of a Medical Director for the Spinal Unit had been created following the recommendation Ludwig Guttmann had made in 1957, yet the appointment of Cheshire was not without controversy. Dr Tom Patrick, then the Austin’s Medical Superintendent had himself wanted to take up the new position, but was informed that the Austin would appoint someone from overseas instead. Patrick then resigned ‘in great disappointment’.\textsuperscript{72} In the interim Dr Frank O’Rourke, a former Resident Medical Officer at the Austin, was appointed as Registrar and ran the Spinal Unit until 1959. Meanwhile, after a further recommendation from Guttmann, the Austin had appointed Cheshire.\textsuperscript{73}

A youthful, British-trained specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation, Cheshire had been a medical officer with the RAF before working as a rehabilitation officer with the Coal Board where he had some acute paraplegics as patients.\textsuperscript{74} Cheshire’s first act on being appointed was to go to Stoke Mandeville where he worked under Guttmann for a number of months before coming out to Australia to begin at the Austin. Cheshire arrived then with an impressive background and skill-set to a place where he would have the independence to be a pioneer. Indeed, ‘it was often said that

\textsuperscript{72} Gault and Lucas, \textit{A Century of Compassion}, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{73} Guttmann also influenced the Austin’s Spinal Unit in another way as Mitchell also points out that during this period, coincidentally, an Australian nurse, Margaret Gale (later Heathorn) was at Stoke Mandeville learning about specialized nursing care. When Guttmann returned home from his trip he informed Gale that she was needed back in Melbourne, and she returned home to work in the Spinal Unit. Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 2.

Cheshire had the best of both worlds – trained by the master Guttmann, and then moving half-a-world away to do his own thing’.75

Janet Paisley remembers Cheshire as a ‘very nice and helpful man’ who had ‘fire in his eyes’ – ‘you noticed him in a room, he was one of those really special people’.76 Cheshire brought new ideas and fresh enthusiasm to his role and ‘fired-up’ both the Spinal Unit and the Paraplegic Association ‘in ways not seen previously’.77 Yet it is important to note, as Geoff Luke did, that Cheshire was also fortunate to be able to build on reformation and development at the Austin that preceded his time there, for while he brought rehabilitation skills, ‘… we had good pioneer efforts by then [and] we handed it on a plate to him. He had to tidy up, get the details right, make everything a little better’.78

Luke’s opinion is supported by the writers of the centenary history of the Austin Hospital, who observed that:

At the Austin, Cheshire found a well-established unit as a result of the work of Patrick and O’Rourke, with equipment made locally, nurses trained in special techniques, physiotherapists and occupational therapists involved in treatment and the opportunity of help from an experienced social worker.79

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76 Interview with Janet Paisley, 12 December, 2013.
77 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 6.
78 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 6.
79 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 6.
One of Cheshire’s most important initiatives was to integrate the acute care ‘of newly injured patients with paraplegia and quadriplegia (tetraplegia), from as soon after injury as possible’. It was a revolutionary and thus controversial move, for it required the orthopaedic surgeons and neurosurgeons who had previously been the primary carers of these recently injured patients to cede some of their control to a ‘new breed of doctor, a rehabilitation specialist’. Moreover, Cheshire also sought to ‘persuade doctors to send patients with spinal injuries direct to the Austin Hospital and not to other hospitals throughout the Metropolitan area’. It must have been an intense period for the newcomer who had to negotiate the intricate internal politics of the Austin Hospital, try and convince the Austin’s displeased surgeons, and wrestle with the inter-institutional dynamics of Melbourne’s metropolitan hospitals. As his obituary later noted, ‘Cheshire won his way with a combination of determination, charm, and on occasion, aggression. He quickly built a world-class spinal injuries unit, and in the process became a world leader in the integration of acute medical care and rehabilitation’. One measure of Cheshire’s success was that by the end of his first full year at the Austin both new admissions and re-admissions to the Spinal Unit had almost doubled with 92 patients coming to the Unit for the first time (up from 54), with 41 returning (up from 25).

For Lucas it seemed like the Austin clearly benefited from Cheshire’s involvement:

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82 Gault and Lucas, A Century of Compassion, p. 145.
84 Gault and Lucas, A Century of Compassion, p. 145.
As I say they were a bit lucky. Before he came they were not quite organised, they had quads in another part and they didn’t have very good facilities for paras, they didn’t have an intensive ward as such for you to go in. So when he came in about 1959, he got an intensive ward done and got the quads back with the paras so that they were all in Ward 17. Then later he managed to get Ward 7 built at the Austin which was again for intensive care - for when you first come in as a para/quad which was good. So they had two wards then, the 17 and 7 for the intensive. I found him a really likeable bloke, like you could sort of sit down and talk to him if you wanted to have a bit of a yarn.\(^{85}\)

Not surprisingly given his training at Stoke Mandeville, Cheshire continued and even extended the focus on using sport as a means of rehabilitation. Lucas recalls that everyone was encouraged by Cheshire and Luke to get involved in sports and particularly wheelchair basketball ‘because we could all do that and we were always over on the tennis court playing. I can remember – it sticks in your mind, some people coming over with bladder problems with a blanket around them still running around and playing basketball there with a group’.

A major sign of the commitment to sport was that the Austin worked together with the Victorian Paraplegic Association to hold the inaugural Australian Paralympic Games in March 1960. As Lucas notes, ‘Cheshire organised that first one, [with well selected] people to make sure it happened’. Visiting teams were even housed at the Austin Hospital, although the actual competitions took place at the basketball and table tennis centres and the MacRobertson School fields in Albert Park.\(^{86}\)

\(^{85}\) This and the following quotations are from an interview with Robin Lucas, 3 April 2012.

\(^{86}\) Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 17; and interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012.
The impetus for the Australian championships – held even before Victoria had even had its first state championship – was based on a perhaps an inevitable expansion of the Stoke Mandeville Games. In an impressive coup for Guttmann, the once annual Games were not only being held outside of Stoke Mandeville for the first time, but they were being held in the same city that was hosting the (Summer) Olympic Games: Rome. At the time the 1960 Games in Rome were known as the ‘Ninth International Stoke Mandeville Games’, reflective of the fact that the previous eight international games had been held at Stoke Mandeville. But soon those looking back would claim the Rome Games as the first of what became the Paralympics.

In his study of the evolution of the Paralympic Games, Ian Brittain muses about how a relatively small ‘niche festival’, involving ‘a minority of athletes on the margin’ was able to reinvent itself to such an extent that it was able to latch on to the premier multi-sport event in the world, namely the Olympic Games. His answer is that it was the indefatigable Guttmann who was, over three decades, responsible for campaigning about, and pushing for, the Olympic link. In short, according to Brittain, ‘His persuasive advocacy was partially accepted initially, sometimes resisted and even challenged, but eventually prevailed so that the Paralympic-Olympic relationship changed from a more informal to a formal one’.

As noted earlier Guttmann had always wanted the Stoke Mandeville Games to be international; an aim that was increasingly realized in the 1950s. A measure of their

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acceptance as a legitimate global sports festival was the fact that in 1956 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) voted to award the Fearnley Cup to the Stoke Mandeville Games for ‘meritorious achievement in the service of the Olympic Movement’ after 18 nations had attended the 1956 Games. As Brittain points out, ‘This was the first occasion when this cup had been awarded to any kind of disability sport organisation’, and he surmises that the award inspired Guttmann, particularly his aspiration, expressed in a speech in 1957, that the Rome Olympic Games would have a separate section for Paralympics.\textsuperscript{89} As part of this ambition, Guttmann took the opportunity to promote the cause when travelling the world, as is evidenced by his trip to Australia. Guttmann was also politically astute in that from the very first Games in 1948 ‘he invited prominent political and social figures, and later added sports stars and celebrities to lift the profile of the Games to attract media attention’, a tactic later mirrored by other disability sporting organizations around the globe.\textsuperscript{90}

Brittain’s illuminating work then goes on to explain that ‘the Olympic acceptance of the Paralympic relationship occurred gradually after some Olympic individuals in high places provided an initial acceptance of Paralympic sport’. However, he does acknowledge that it took a while for the IOC to come to grips with the implications of the Olympic branding of the Paralympics and to establish a ‘preferred relationship’.\textsuperscript{91} Brittain also puts forward the view that the international media were influential in the promotion of the ‘Paralympic’ name, possibly because it was ‘shorter, sharper and

\textsuperscript{89} Brittain, ‘The Evolution of the Paralympic Games’, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{90} Brittain, ‘The Evolution of the Paralympic Games’, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{91} Brittain, ‘The Evolution of the Paralympic Games’, p. 19.
more newsworthy than such terms as Paraplegic Olympics’.\textsuperscript{92} This again was in keeping with Guttmann’s wishes, and there were several occasions in the 1940s and 1950s whereby the British press in particular used Olympic vernacular in referring to events such as ‘the “Olympic Games” of Disabled Men’, or the ‘Wheelchair Olympiad’, and, as Brittain highlights, the term ‘Paralympics’ and ‘Paralympic Game’ were being used in British newspapers as early as 1953.\textsuperscript{93} It is thought that references to the ‘Paraolympics of Stoke Mandeville’ and the ‘Paraplegic Olympics’ in the same issue of the Cord, the long-running newsletter of Stoke Mandeville Hospital, eventually led to an amalgamation and shortening of the words to ‘Paralympic Games’.\textsuperscript{94} However, minutes of the Stoke Mandeville Games Committee do reveal that the IOC ‘raised the strongest objections to the use of the word “Paralympics”’, even though the international press, in the lead-up to the Rome Games, disregarded such a view and continued to refer to the 1960 event as the Paralympics.\textsuperscript{95}

Those participating in the 1960 Australian Paraplegic Games did not know, of course, what was to come. Instead their excitement lay in the possibility of doing well enough to be selected for the Australian team that was being sent to participate in the Rome Games. As Kevin Coombs recalled, the selection criteria was much stricter than it has now become – ‘in those days you had to play in different sports to be selected, because they wouldn’t take anyone away for one event. I think they said you had to be

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\textsuperscript{92} Brittain, ‘The Evolution of the Paralympic Games’, p. 19. \\
\textsuperscript{93} Brittain, ‘The Evolution of the Paralympic Games’, p. 23. \\
\textsuperscript{94} Brittain, ‘The Evolution of the Paralympic Games’, p. 24. \\
\end{flushright}
able to represent Australia in six events to be able to go, which is unheard of these days’.  

All this fuss about sport seemed bizarre to one of the newest patients at the Austin Hospital, Margaret Lester (nee Watkins). Lester had been involved in a bad car accident in February 1960 when the car she was travelling in slid off the road and flipped over in a gully near Mullengandra in southern New South Wales. The crash left her with paraplegia, along with a crushed chest, broken ribs, a bruised lung, fractured jaw and severe concussion. Still in shock from her accident, Lester ‘had had no experience of wheelchair athletics and simply could not visualize anything of the kind. She was still unconvinced when within a week or so the Austin began to buzz and hum with an influx of disabled people’ a number of whom were tipping that Coombs, Moretti and a third Austin patient Fred Martin would ‘be chosen to represent Australia at the Rome Games’.

The allure of an overseas tournament was undeniable and teams came from all the mainland states. Held over the course of just one day – 17 March – the gathered athletes competed at everything from basketball to javelin to table tennis to archery to the pentathlon. When asked if he had competed in the pentathlon Coombs replied that ‘I think I tried everything. I wanted to go away’. Indeed, Coombs noted that the possibility of going to Rome was thrilling.

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96 The following is from an interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012.

97 This and the following is from June Epstein, *Mermaid on Wheels: The Story of Margaret Lester*, Sydney: Ure Smith, 1967, pp. 67-68; and Gloria Newton, “The “Mermaid on Wheels””, *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 1 May 1968, 12. It is worth noting that David Cheshire wrote the foreword for Epstein’s book and also contributed an appendix entitled ‘What is Paraplegia?’.

98 Interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012.
Perhaps because everything was still just at the beginning, the collective memory of the first Australian Paraplegic Games is not strong and little has been written about them. Bruno Moretti’s strongest memory is of the basketball competition which was already a passionate affair amongst the different states. The final between Victoria and Western Australia was particularly intense.

I remember the point where we weren’t all that strong as far as our club itself. We were only beginning, we were getting stronger but we weren’t very strong at the time. Western Australia was the strongest team back then, and when we played the final in Melbourne, it was a great experience because you didn’t know what to expect. But you sort of felt that we might have a chance. But to the point where my parents weren’t all that keen on me in sport anyway.  

Moretti’s parents came along, though neither had a sense that something important was at stake, and his father was never ‘very keen’ or interested in Moretti’s involvement in sport. Still, Moretti remembers being quite eager:

Well I was very excited naturally enough, because I love playing sport. Playing against Western Australia - and actually they went on to win five championships in a row until 1972 when we beat them. But it was a long time before that … going back to that we wanted to beat them, and we wanted to play them. We got to the final, and unfortunately we fell short. But it was a great game, I still remember it … But once again, we didn’t have the people - there was no such thing as a coach. We just went out there and played, and I mean therefore when you don’t know tactics, you don’t know anything.

99 Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
what’s going on. As a kid, as I was – I was nineteen then – I mean you just went out there and played. You just want to beat the buggers.\textsuperscript{100}

Yet although Victoria lost the wheelchair competition to Western Australia, they won enough other events to win the ‘Interstate Challenge Trophy’.\textsuperscript{101} Lester was still too injured to attend, but the standard of competition was high enough to impress members of her family who went off to watch events at Albert Park. They came back to the Austin Hospital excited by what they had seen and enthused a sceptical Lester about the possibilities for paraplegic sport.\textsuperscript{102} The predictions that Lester had heard for months were partially correct, and on the basis of their performance Moretti and Coombs were selected as the Victorian representatives for the Australian team that was due to compete at the Rome Paralympic Games in September the same year.\textsuperscript{103}

Moretti’s parents had immigrated from Italy, and his mother ‘was absolutely tickled pink to think that I was representing Australia’ and travelling to Italy to do it.\textsuperscript{104} But before they could travel there was a need to raise funds. As the sports historian Bernard Whimpress has noted, ‘The finance for these games in the early years had to be raised chiefly by voluntary public subscriptions, unlike the Olympic and Commonwealth Games teams which received Federal Government support’.\textsuperscript{105} Coombs recalls that much of the fundraising was done by the athletes themselves:

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{100} Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{101} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Epstein, \textit{Mermaid on Wheels}, p. 68.
\item \textsuperscript{103} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 17.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
\end{enumerate}
We got permission to shake the tins outside the Swimming Centre. The great Jack Kramer’s [tennis] troupe were out again, and that [venue] was packed that night, and me and Bruno and a lot of other people were, you know, at the exits shaking the tins. I look back … and sort of think, ‘I didn’t do that, did I?’ But we did it to get a quid to send the team to Rome. There was hardly any corporate money I think, and hardly any government money.\textsuperscript{106}

The team did, however, have the support of the Austin Hospital which granted leave for Cheshire and Fred Ring, a nurse, to help support the ten men and one woman on the team. Additional staff included ‘Johnno’ Johnson from Western Australia and Kevin Betts from New South Wales.\textsuperscript{107}

It was a long trip, but Coombs and Moretti loved it. The team members met up in Perth for a week and then travelled to Singapore where they stopped for a few more days before heading to Rome. As Coombs notes, ‘It was a great … very exciting really, to go away and I tell a lot of the Paralympians today that when we went away, we were away for six weeks’.\textsuperscript{108} But in Singapore Coombs was reminded of discrimination back home. It was 1960, and immigration to Australia was still regulated by the so-called ‘White Australia Policy.’ Coombs, Moretti and some of the West Australians were walking around Singapore and Coombs was wearing a T-shirt that had ‘Australia’ written on the back. ‘After a little while, I noticed all these people were following us, especially me, and they were looking at me. Being an Aboriginal, I

\textsuperscript{106} Interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012.
\textsuperscript{107} Interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012; Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
\textsuperscript{108} Interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012.
turned around, and I said ‘What are you guys following me for?’. What they wanted to know was, how did I get into Australia’.  

Once the team arrived in Rome, Moretti was in his element:

Oh yeah, I’d say it was one of the best trips I ever had with the Australian team. That was because it was Italian, and Italian food that I was used to. Every meal that we had over there, came with a little bottle of wine and also mineral water. That was part of the deal … we weren’t allowed to drink, so we were taking all the bottles back to our dormitory, and at the end of the Games. I didn’t, because I never drank at that time. Of course a lot of the guys got very drunk.

For Coombs and the other athletes it was wonderful having Moretti because he was able to act as the team’s translator. ‘Well we were all young blokes and it was a great experience. We were pretty flash, we took our own interpreter, which is Bruno. But he was very good actually. He did come in handy being able to speak the language, and he was great on that trip’.  

The Australian team were thrilled to be wearing official uniforms at the Games, with the coat-of-arms on them. And the team performed creditably winning three gold medals, six silver medals and one bronze medal. One of the silver medals was won by Moretti at table tennis in partnership with the West Australian Bill Mather-Brown. Moretti’s long arms made him an excellent player, and he had the ability to serve in such a way that the opponents would generally hit the ball back in a manner that

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109 Interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012.
110 Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
111 Interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012.
allowed Mather-Brown to smash the ball away. As Moretti tells it, the doubles pair
was ahead in the gold medal match when a smash from Mather-Brown went astray
and the pair still ‘rib’ each other about the lost opportunity each time they meet up.112
However, as Moretti also notes, while the Australian team had a number of great
athletes in it, they were still relatively new to their sports and a number of the
overseas players were simply better. ‘There were better players overseas, and
therefore that’s where we couldn’t climb that mountain to be better than them. Once
again, it probably comes [down] to competition, and it comes back to how well you
prepare to beat the opposition, and that’s one of the things we were always lacking
there’.113 Coombs also felt that the inexperience of the Australian squad counted
against them. ‘It was a big experience and I think in a lot of ways, a lot of our people
were just over-awed on the occasion’.114

Back home in Australia the Melbourne media coverage of the Rome Games was
meagre and confined to the main daily newspapers, with the Herald publishing four
small articles on the Games and the Age publishing two. Notably the two sporting
newspapers – the Sporting Judge and the Sporting Globe – did not cover the games
and neither did the Sun, the News Weekly, the Advocate, or the Weekly Times. The
terminology used by in the initial headlines was also revealing, with the Age referring
to the Games as the ‘Rome Olympics for Disabled’ while the Herald announced more
problematically that ‘Cripples Open Their Games’.115

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112 Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
113 Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
114 Interview with Kevin Coombs, 27 March 2012.
115 See ‘Rome Olympics for Disabled Under Way’, Age, 19 September 1960, p. 4; and ‘Cripples Open
Those at the Austin Hospital and the Victorian Paraplegic Association would develop a stronger, more positive relationship with the media over the next few decades, especially with regards to fundraising. But if the early Paraplegic Games did not garner great media interest, the inaugural Australian Paraplegic Games had a crucial role in influencing a senior Victorian public servant. Dr Lindell, the Director of the Victorian Government’s Hospital and Charities Commission, was in attendance at Albert Park, and Cheshire used the opportunity to lobby him incessantly for the purchase of a hostel that could be used for paraplegic accommodation.\textsuperscript{116} Described as ‘a personable and clever man’, Lindell was supportive of measures that assisted voluntary health-care organisation and admired organisations that focused on treating the ‘whole person’ as the Austin Hospital was with its use of sport for rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{117} Two years later the dream became a reality when the Austin Hospital obtained funding from the Hospital and Charities Commission and purchased a former Red Cross convalescent home for ex-servicemen located in Kew. Some structural alterations were made, and the John Newman Morris Hostel for Paraplegics was eventually opened by Dame Pattie Menzies on 6 March 1962, with three people from the Austin Hospital, one of whom was Coombs, immediately taking up residence.\textsuperscript{118} Although the purpose of the hostel was to provide transitional accommodation for both males and females who had been rehabilitated to the stage of being physically able to undertake regular employment, the building also provided temporary accommodation for country people with paraplegia who were visiting

\textsuperscript{116} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{117} Cecily Hunter, ‘Bureaucracy, Benevolence and Medical Innovation’, \textit{Health and History}, vol. 6, no. 1 (2004), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{118} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 9. See also Coombs, \textit{A Fortunate Accident}, p. 22.
Melbourne for short periods.\textsuperscript{119} It was a victory for the Austin and a sign of the ways that sport could shape public policy.

\textsuperscript{119} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, pp. 9-10.
In July 1964 Bob Thornton was being driven up Mount Baw Baw to enjoy the snow with some Rover Scouts (the young adult Scouts group for 18-25 year olds).\textsuperscript{120} Thornton was in the back of the car with his leg stretched out because he was nursing a ‘bung knee’ suffered in a rock-climbing incident the previous Easter. He ‘was just going up to play cook for the weekend and allow the boys extra time to ski’. But the trip was derailed by a car accident that left a fellow passenger with a broken collarbone and Thornton a ‘T12-L1’ paraplegic.

In a testament to the integrated treatment developed by David Cheshire, Thornton was soon at the Austin Hospital Spinal Unit for both his acute care and subsequent rehabilitation. As Thornton ruefully noted, playing sport for rehabilitation was not a matter of choice:

I’d like to say I participated in sport but we had to participate in sport in those days, not that I really minded. I developed an interest and the lass who was running the sports sessions seemed to think I had some promise so she helped me out quite a bit. Subsequently I took up javelin throwing, most of the field events, shot put, discus, basketball, and dabbled in a few things like rifle-shooting and fencing. But my main claim to fame, if you want to put it like that, was in the javelin and second-string basketball.

By the time Thornton arrived at the Austin Hospital the sports and supporting environment was much more organized than that which Kevin Coombs, Bruno

\textsuperscript{120} This and the following details are from an interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.
Moretti and even Robin Lucas had encountered. Part of that was due to the developing expertise of the staff at the Austin, but another aspect was the formation of a new club solely devoted to the development of sporting opportunities for paraplegics.

Founded on 23 May 1962, the formation of the Victorian Paraplegic Sports Club was driven by Herb Sanderson. A former British marine, Sanderson was a tough man who became the ‘Sports Master’ at the Spinal Unit around 1961. Involvement in sporting competitions had formerly been overseen by a ‘Sports’ subcommittee of the Victorian Paraplegic Association. Christine Mitchell notes that the new Sports Club was in part a response to (somewhat ‘friendly’) tensions between those who felt sport was overshadowing the social welfare work of the Association, and those whose interest in the association was solely concerned with sport.

While the new Sports Club still maintained ties to the Paraplegic Association, it had its own constitution, office bearers, committee and annual general meetings, with Sanderson emphasizing ‘the need for the Sports Club’s activities to be organized by the members themselves, thus relieving the parent Association of the burden of this work’. John O’Neill was the inaugural chairman, with Lucas the secretary and Allan Ward the treasurer, while Coombs and Barry Holmes were on the committee.

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123 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, pp. 20-21.
Later Thornton would join the club and be an active member, eventually becoming the president.\textsuperscript{125}

The formation of the Victorian Paraplegic Sports Club – or Paravics, as it was later known – was also a sign of the way services and sporting opportunities for people with paraplegia were developing in other Australian states. This Victorian club modelled its constitution on the Paraplegic Sports Club of NSW which had been formed in October 1961.\textsuperscript{126} Whereas the Victorian Paraplegic Association and ensuing Sports Club had developed with support of the Austin Hospital, in New South Wales the key institution was Sydney’s Royal North Shore Hospital, with Dr John Grant from its Department of Neurosurgery playing a significant and pioneering role. Like his counterpart at the Austin Hospital, Grant had met Guttmann at Stoke Mandeville and witnessed his work.\textsuperscript{127} In 1958 at Grant’s request, the Medical Board of the Royal North Shore Hospital agreed to a paraplegic and quadriplegic sporting event and many supporters, included Hospital staff and volunteers, attended. Jeanette Smith notes that there was a ‘carnival-type atmosphere’ on the day, with many families and friends in attendance.\textsuperscript{128} Over time, the Royal North Shore Hospital Games became well established and continued until 1987.

Smith notes that during the 1960s wheelchair sport in New South Wales was primarily run by volunteers who took broad responsibility for planning and organizing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{125} Interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Smith, \textit{Pushing Strong}, p. 21.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Smith, \textit{Pushing Strong}, p. 22.
\end{itemize}
activities. Meetings were often held around kitchen tables and volunteers often provided accommodation for competitors in their homes due to a lack of funding for transport and accommodation. She concludes that ‘The support and commitment from members’ families and friends was … instrumental in the organisation’s growth and development at this time’.  

This scenario must have been repeated in other states of Australia, and especially in Victoria where the Austin Hospital was a beacon for paraplegic patients and their families.

Along with selecting teams and making arrangements for competitions, the Paraplegic Sports Club became heavily involved in fundraising. Just as the Austin Hospital rode a wave of public interest by involving international and Australian tennis celebrities in a wheelchair basketball match against paraplegic patients in 1958, in the 1960s they leveraged the fame and popularity of Australian Rules footballers for similar wheelchair basketball matches. In this context, it should be noted that the sport of basketball gained unprecedented public attention in the lead-up to, during, and after the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne. As host nation, Australia was competing in Olympic basketball for the first time, and every game at the tournament was sold out, despite the fact that there were only around 1500 registered players in Victoria at this time.

However, even before the Olympic caravan arrived in Melbourne, basketball fever was sweeping the city, with a newly formed National Basketball Association running

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a highly popular summer competition exclusively for Victorian Football League (VFL) players from November 1955. Most clubs took the competition seriously and many appointed outside coaching experts, with reports that the games themselves were often violent and accompanied with a lot of ‘hype’. The competition continued on for several years after the Olympic Games, indicating that League coaches could see the benefit of having their players involved in the physically tough and crowd-pleasing sport of basketball.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that as part of their fundraising efforts to cover the costs of participation in the Paralympic Games, the Austin Hospital Spinal Unit should turn to wheelchair basketball during the 1960s as a spectacular demonstration of the skills and fitness of paraplegic patients against high-profile football clubs in Melbourne. In fact, if any disability sporting activity was going to attract crowds, media attention and accompanying good will in Melbourne, it was surely going to be the sight of some of the competition’s best footballers doing battle on the ‘level playing-field’ of a basketball court against sometimes superior opponents.

The formal origins of wheelchair basketball seem to lie in the United States, with the first National Wheelchair Basketball Tournament held there in 1949. Geoff Luke remembers reading about the dominant American team, the ‘Pan Am Jets’ who came to international attention at the 1955 Stoke Mandeville Games. Perhaps due to basketball’s growing popularity it quickly became the sport of choice for many of the

132 Steadward and Peterson, Paralympics, p. 32.
patients at the Austin hospital. As Lucas recalls, it was a quick sport that was great fun to play and the involvement of team-work gave it an added dimension in comparison to many of the other individual sports. Indeed, during their time of rehabilitation at the Austin, Lucas, Coombs and others would play basketball almost constantly.

The first wheelchair basketball match against VFL teams seems to have been a contest against the Melbourne Football Club in 1961. While the media attention given to the 1960 Paralympics in Rome was meagre, the interest in the wheelchair basketball matches was immediate with a photograph appearing of the famous Melbourne captain Ron Barassi and Lucas in wheelchairs on the front page of the *Sun*. Opening the newspaper the next morning, a shocked Lucas almost ‘fell out’ of his car. Although this game had not been organised specifically with fundraising in mind, the prominent front-page exposure created exciting potential for any future contests.

Over the next decade the Victorian Paraplegic Sports Club would play against a number of other VFL teams including the Carlton, Collingwood, Essendon, Geelong, North Melbourne, and St Kilda Football Clubs. Memorabilia from these games in the form of tickets and press clippings have also survived in the scrapbooks of patients and staff from the Austin Hospital. For example, Eva Zselenyi, a physical education instructor (or ‘remedial gymnast’, according to some press reports) at the Spinal Unit, was often the photogenic face of the Hospital’s fundraising efforts, and her

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134 Interview with Robin Lucas, 3 April 2012.
scrapbooks (some only recently uncovered) are replete with images of her with visiting VFL footballers testing their wheelchair basketball skills against patients. Several photographs feature Carlton fullback Wes Lofts in a wheelchair, and Bruno Moretti is also prominent as his opponent. In nearly every example, the fact that funds raised would be used to finance trips to the Paralympic Games is mentioned, such as in 1964 when funds were needed for the Tokyo trip. Lucas also has a number of ‘Wheelchair Basketball Contest’ tickets in his extensive collection of disability sport artefacts, recording that matches were played against VFL clubs in venues such as the St Kilda Road Police Training Depot and the Olympic Hall in West Heidelberg, with proceeds for the Australian Paralympic team or in some cases for the ‘Victorian Paraplegics Recreation Building Fund’.

As the Sports Club secretary, Lucas was involved in organising the matches, often using particular contacts such as Luke who also worked at the Carlton Football Club. Lucas found it ‘great’ watching the footballers who would try and compensate for their lack of skills with wheelchairs by using their athleticism, throwing themselves backwards to try and catch balls over their heads and falling out of their chairs in the process.  

Part of the fun was the opportunity to mix with these famous footballers who were celebrated and adored by so many. Thornton remembers for instance, how the triple Brownlow Medalist Bobby Skilton ‘was an absolute hoot’:

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136 Zselenyi also appeared as the cover girl for the *Austin Hospital Reporter* in September 1966, after she was crowned ‘Miss Million Dollars’ in an Austin Hospital fundraising appeal. She also later became engaged to Wes Lofts.

137 Interview with Robin Lucas, 3 April 2012.
He was the funniest man I’ve ever come across. I remember one night we were playing down at Emerald Hall – which should have been condemned – and Skilton had this thick white, woolen, hand-knitted jumper on and he got hot, so off came the jumper. He just threw it across the floor through four inches of dust and I remember thinking ‘Geez, your wife is going to be happy when she sees that’.  

The contests drew large crowds with often more than a thousand people attending. In addition to raising money, the matches showed both the audience and the football players just how physically demanding the sport of wheelchair basketball was, and thus showcased both the physicality and skills of the Paraplegic Sports Club members. Thornton recalls how ‘the footballers had no idea about pushing the wheelchair and they’d jump up out of their chairs to grab the ball’. Often after the games had finished a footballer or two would come up to Thornton and say ‘this is actually more physically hard than playing the game of football because it was a different set of muscles’.

For young men living in a society that celebrated male strength and toughness, one of the most confronting aspects about being (at least partially) paralysed was the way it could possibly emasculate them, making them dependent on others and challenging their masculinity. As one of the few women working at the Spinal Unit, the patients often tried to convince Zselenyi that they were still strong, virile men, but perhaps because they focused so much attention on this matter it seemed to her that ‘their confidence was squashed in that department’. 

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138 This and the following details are from an interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.
139 Interview with Eva Zselenyi, 13 April 2012.
The rehabilitation processes at the Austin hospital not only enabled many of the patients to rebuild their independence, the exhibition wheelchair basketball matches showed before large crowds that the young men could still excel at tests of strength and toughness against the emblematic masculine figures of the day. Their feats were also celebrated in newspapers, with stories appearing in newspapers from the Sporting Globe, to the Herald, Sun and Age. Some of the footballers also became friends with the Sports Club members with Barry Richardson, in particular, often dropping by to chat and going with members to football games.\textsuperscript{140}

The demand for wheelchair basketball was so great that the Paraplegic Sports Club regularly travelled out to regional Victorian centres. As Thornton observed, ‘we went all over Victoria basically and they promoted us and we went in and gave them some entertainment and we were lucky they paid [us] to do it’.\textsuperscript{141} Additional funds were raised by matches against the famous Harlem Globetrotters basketball troupe who played against the Paraplegic Sports Club on multiple occasions. Like the footballers, the Globetrotters were frustrated by the difficulty of using wheelchairs and came away with a renewed sense of just how tough it was to play wheelchair basketball at a high level.\textsuperscript{142}

While Lucas, Thornton and others were able to play at a high level, even they were regularly amazed by the feats performed by Coombs and Moretti on basketball courts. Lucas recalls how ‘you kept hearing the name Kevin Coombs. He was a super

\textsuperscript{140} Interview with Eva Zselenyi, 13 April 2012.
\textsuperscript{141} Interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.
\textsuperscript{142} Interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.
basketballer, I’d never seen a fellow who could dribble down the court, using one hand to steer the [very difficult old wheelchairs]. It was actually amazing how he played’. Meanwhile Moretti was able to use his long arms to excellent effect at basketball as well as table tennis. ‘He was excellent at table tennis and the same with wheelchair basketball. He used to be able to grab on to the rim and run right around and was very manoeuvrable because those front wheel drive chairs spin around very quickly’. Both players inspired Thornton as he first sought to recover and then join in:

Kevin, was unbelievable, as was Bruno in his own way. I mean Bruno used a different chair to everybody else and his chair handling was the highlight of his thing, he was highly manoeuvrable, he was quick, because he used a front wheel drive with the little wheels at the back and he could basically spin on the spot, whereas Kevin was just the most superb ball handler and he had an uncanny eye for throwing baskets. He was just unbelievable.

While the Paraplegic Sports Club provided opportunities for elite, entertaining, and social sport that was essential in the rehabilitation of many members, the activities of the Victorian Paraplegic Association remained vital in assisting the Sports Club members. Cheshire remained active in the Association, and was known for introducing people onto the Committee of Management from outside the hospital. One such person was Helen Gillies, a trained nurse who became paralysed in 1954 as the result of a car accident. Following her treatment, Cheshire wanted Gillies to work at the Austin Hospital, but she chose to remain as a nurse tutor at the Alfred Hospital.

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143 Interview with Robin Lucas, 3 April 2012.
144 Interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.
Even so, she did agree to be part of the Association’s Committee of Management, serving until 1976.\textsuperscript{145}

Cheshire’s then wife Peg (Margaret) was also very active, founding the Donvale auxiliary group that supported the Association, and it was through attending auxiliary events with Peg that Janet Paisley (who was then teaching David and Peg’s daughter) first met her future husband. Groups like the Donvale auxiliary would assist in the provision of rehabilitative sporting opportunities for patients at the Austin, with members of the Donvale auxiliary for example, regularly driving patients to Box Hill so that they could swim in a heated pool.\textsuperscript{146}

Mitchell is emphatic that both the Association and the staff of the Spinal Unit believed that ‘rehabilitation of the patients was more than getting them out of bed and becoming mobile in wheelchairs’.\textsuperscript{147} As she states ‘Both bodies took a holistic approach to rehabilitation’, and ‘it was about making patients fully functioning individuals in society: living independently; working for an income; driving; playing sport and having relationships’.\textsuperscript{148}

In 1959, the Association had become formally affiliated with the Hospital and Charities Commission and registered as a charitable organization. This status allowed the group to accept donations and conduct fundraising activities, such as selling raffle

\textsuperscript{145} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{146} ‘Swimming Date’, \textit{Age}, 29 June 1967, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{147} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{148} Mitchell, \textit{It Began with a Dream}, p. 7.
tickets, shaking collection tins at sporting events, and having people take part in door-knocking campaigns.\(^{149}\)

Some of these funds were used to help develop the John Newman Morris Hostel for Paraplegics (the purchase of which was noted in the previous chapter). Alan Robertson and Cheshire were inaugural members of the Newman Morris Hostel Advisory Committee, and although the battle had been won to gain the building, there were, according to Cheshire, ‘many and devious … circumnavigations’ at play in ensuring the paraplegic hostel was managed in an efficient and appropriate manner.\(^{150}\)

When Robertson stood down from the Advisory Committee and as president of the Association, it was Cyril Thomas, a community liaison officer from the Victorian Employers Federation, a representative of his employer on the Advisory Board, who eventually took over as president of the Association from 1963 to 1966.\(^{151}\) Mitchell records that Thomas ‘worked tirelessly for the Association in all areas, especially employment, accommodation and sport, even going overseas with the team to one of the international games’.\(^{152}\)

As noted earlier, Coombs spent his adolescence away from his family in the Austin Hospital and later lived at the John Newman Morris Hostel. When interviewed in 1997, Coombs remarked that Thomas ‘… was a very good man for the organisation in its formative years … He got a lot of people involved … and he showed us the way’.

\(^{149}\) Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 7.

\(^{150}\) Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 9.

\(^{151}\) Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 10. As Mitchell notes, Thomas remained on the Advisory Board for some time, and was awarded an MBE in 1972.

\(^{152}\) Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 10.
Coombs also added that ‘Cyril was very good to me and he gave me a lot of advice, especially in my teen years’. In his biography, Coombs devotes almost two pages to his time at the hostel, and there are two photographs of him at the facility, with one image of Coombs at a washing machine captioned as follows: ‘I was learning independent living skills’. Coombs describes how he and his mates Teddy Gruberry, Ivan Risojevic, Leon Addison and Reiner Schmidt, managed to obtain work with Ransley Glass in Collingwood, where eventually six of the eleven employees were ‘wheelchair boys’. Picked up each morning by the owner of the company, Jack Richardson, Coombs’ job at Ransley Glass ‘was either cutting glass in lengths for the glassblowers, or … [making] … little glass asthma sprays’.

The company eventually expanded and moved from Collingwood to Springvale, but not before Coombs saved enough money to buy his first car, ‘a magnificent E. J. Holden’. Although he described driving a manual car by hand controls as ‘a bloody hard job’, Coombs’ account of the excitement at having his own vehicle, and the independence that came with it, is palpable. While Coombs only stayed with the company for a short while after it moved to Springvale, Risojevic remained with what was to become Varian Techtron for 42 years.

In 1963, The Australian Paraplegic declared that the previous year would ‘go down in history as one of the most fruitful in the Australian-wide expansion and consolidation

153 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 10.
154 Coombs, A Fortunate Accident, p. 23.
155 Coombs, A Fortunate Accident, p. 22.
156 Coombs, A Fortunate Accident, p. 24.
of the treatment and social welfare of paraplegics’. In Victoria, much of the success of the year was measured in terms of the amount of fundraising and auxiliary work that occurred. Sport was a direct beneficiary of this activity as some of the money raised was used, *inter alia*, for participation in local, national and international athletic competitions (as discussed in the following chapter). At the national level, an Australian Paraplegic Council (later to become the Australian Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Council) was formed in 1962, with Cheshire elected as president and Robertson as secretary-treasurer. A constitution for this body was prepared, along with the formulation of general purposes. However, it is worth noting that the Council did agree that in terms of their objectives, social welfare concerns would have prominence over sport, despite the fact that the Australian Paralympic Games were scheduled for Sydney in September of that year, and the first Commonwealth Paraplegic Games scheduled for Perth in November.

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158 Cited in Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 10.
159 Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 12.
160 The unamended functions of the Australian Paraplegics Council were listed, in part, in the first issue of *The Australian Paraplegic*, vol. 1, no. 1 (September 1962), p. 7, and are listed as an appendix in Mitchell, *It Began as a Dream*, p. 114.
Michael Dow was five when he contracted polio while his family was living in Borneo. The year was 1950 and Dow’s mother brought Michael and his brother back to Melbourne while his father continued to work for Shell in Borneo. Then in 1954 they all followed his father’s work to Venezuela before returning to Melbourne in 1959. Dow was a keen swimmer and in 1962 his interest was piqued by stories of the Victorian athletes sent to Perth for the inaugural Commonwealth Paraplegic Games. Dow followed news of the Games closely, and remembers looking at some of the times they did and thinking ‘Gee, I can beat them by about 20 seconds’. What Dow was unaware of, was that individuals paralysed by polio tended to have greater movement in their lower limbs than people who had become paraplegics through accidents to their spine. Nevertheless, an inspired Dow began training and was soon representing Victoria and Australia.

That Dow had come across references to disabled sport through his general reading of newspapers was testament to how interest in sporting opportunities and achievements of those with spinal injuries was increasing. Part of this interest had been fostered by the exhibition wheelchair basketball matches organised by the Victorian Paraplegic Sports Club. But the interest was also fostered by the development of an intertwined set of local, national and international sporting contests for those with disabilities. Indeed, 1962 was a year that began the process for the Victorians with the inaugural

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162 This and the following details are from an interview with Michael Dow, 29 May 2012.
Victorian Championships at Albert Park, followed by the Australian Championships in Sydney, and then the Commonwealth Games in Perth.

As the Paravics Monthly Newsletter – the publication of the Victorian Paraplegic Association – noted, it seemed counter-intuitive that the first Victorian Championships were occurring two years after the inaugural Australian Championships had been held in Melbourne, but added that ‘at least it shows we are getting organized all around Australia’. The ambitious Sanderson had hoped that the Paraplegic Sports Club could form partnerships with state and local sporting bodies, and the Victorian Championships provided an opportunity for this, with Sanderson securing ‘Officials from the Victorian Amateur Athletic Association’ and ‘Essendon Bowmen’ as well as ‘two umpires from the Basketball Association’.

The Victorian Championships were dominated by Kevin Coombs and Bruno Moretti, with the pair winning eight of the thirteen titles on offer. Coombs won the javelin, club throw, shot put, pentathlon and light weightlifting division, while Moretti won the feather-weightlifting division, along with the singles and doubles in table-tennis, the latter in partnership with Graeme Philip. Coombs did, however, suffer the disappointment of having the basketball team he captained being defeated by the rival squad captained by Robin Lucas. In other results, Bill Ingram was victorious in the precision javelin, Vic O’Connor in the archery, Danny Coster and D. Pierce in the double archery, and Barry Holmes in the heavy weightlifting division.

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164 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 18, 21.
165 These and the following results are detailed in the Paravics Monthly Newsletter, vol. 3, no. 4 (April 1962).
The inclusion of weightlifting was an Australian innovation based upon the weightlifting program developed in Perth and then expanded upon in Melbourne by Geoff Luke who thought it superior to archery. As Luke noted to Mitchell, ‘Guttmann was against it as he thought it too dangerous and even tried to have it removed, but Australia managed to persuade the international governing committee on its safety and merit’.  

On the basis of the Victorian Championships the following team was selected to represent Victoria in the Australian Championships being held up in Sydney on 27-29 September: Coster; Ian Duckling; Holmes; Ingram; Lucas; Moretti; O’Connor; Alan Robertson; ‘Butch’ Schmidt; Harold Sheppard; Ivan Watts; and Alan Yeomans. A notable absentee was Coombs who was unfortunately suffering from some health problems.

The journey to and from Sydney quickly became the stuff of legends. While one athlete needed to fly, the rest went up in a convoy of cars driven by Lucas, Moretti, Sheppard and Yeomans. Luke had been denied his request to travel with the team so he took annual leave and he and his wife accompanied the team on their holidays, with Luke acting as a ‘traffic officer’ and doing ‘a lot to make the journey as easy as possible’. For Luke the journey itself was as much a triumph as the National Championships – in just a few years he had seen the ‘demoralised’ patients of the

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166 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 19.


1950s become independent men again who could get themselves anywhere they wanted to go: ‘By the early 60s the show was on the road’.  

The Lord Mayor of Sydney opened the Games, adding value to the occasion by also launching an appeal for £30,000 towards a hostel for paraplegics. Although some facilities were a little problematic – the table tennis players had to battle the winds gusting through the open marquee where the tables were situated – the players had a wonderful time. Herb Sanderson was the official member of the Austin staff with the team, and his report highlighted a number of results, including Holmes and Ingram beating the favourites in the archery doubles competition, Robertson winning the snooker gold medal, Moretti triumphing over Lucas in an all-Victorian table tennis singles final, and Moretti and Philip winning the doubles in table tennis.

In a notable aside, Sanderson noted that although the Victorian team did not have any women in it, a number of women from other states participated in the Championships, with the perhaps ‘over-awed’ Victorian table tennis doubles combination of Yeomans and Schmidt losing to ‘Daphne Ceeney the world record swimmer’ and her (male) partner. Ceeney had been Australia’s only female representative at the Rome Paralympics, where she won two gold medals, three silver medals and a bronze, and clearly was something of a celebrity at the 1962 Australian championships.

For Sanderson the ‘THE highlight of the Games’ was the heavyweight division of the weightlifting competition. The entry from Queensland, Victor Renalson began at

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170 Unless otherwise noted, this and the following details are from *Paravics Monthly Newsletter*, vol. 3, no. 10 (October 1962).
lb which was the best lift of the other leading competitor, Jonny Turich from Western Australia, who watched with everyone else as Renalson then lifted 310, 320 and then 330 lbs. Though Renalson was not from Victoria both Sanderson and Luke took pride in his ‘fantastic effort’ which they took as a reflection of their efforts to grow that sport, and Sanderson noted that ‘the applause echoed around Mt Wilgar for a full two minutes’. But Sanderson’s report implies that it was basketball, not weightlifting, that aroused the greatest passions of spectators. The final between Victoria and Western Australia was the last event at the Championships, and though Victoria (with Coombs unavailable) were ‘thrashed’, Sanderson noted that ‘I can assure readers that it was the most exciting game of all’:

Thrills and spills, wheels coming off chairs (Bruno’s especially) and players spilling out of chairs through literally throwing themselves at the ball. The sideline barrackers must have equalled Carlton and Essendon supporters in their fervour and at times the referee’s whistle could not be heard. Both sides used all their substitutes in an effort to keep the game going, and Victoria fought it out until the final whistle.

That evening, during a ‘grand barbecue’ at St Ives amidst ‘high spirits – in more ways than one’ the team for the forthcoming Commonwealth Paraplegic Games was announced, with each of the women and men selected receiving an enthusiastic round of applause. Three Victorians were selected, Moretti for table tennis, Yeomans for swimming, and Robertson to play both snooker and captain the Australian team.

As Mitchell notes, ‘a lot’ of fundraising was required before the inaugural Commonwealth Paraplegic Games could proceed.\(^{171}\) In order not to impede the large

\(^{171}\) These and the following details are from Mitchell, *It Began with a Dream*, p. 20.
West Australian appeal for the ‘other’ (able-bodied) Commonwealth Games that were scheduled for just after the Paraplegic Games, the organizing committee requested that the other Australian states raise most of the funds needed. After an intense series of activities and events by the Victorian Paraplegic Association, Paravics and the Ladies Auxiliary, the Association still found itself for the first time in a position of needing to request funds from the Victorian Government. Fortunately, the State Government matched the £500 provided by the West Australian and New South Wales Government and a financial crisis was averted.

Held in Perth for a week from 10-17 November, the first Commonwealth Paraplegic Games were ‘a resounding success’.172 Teams came from England, India, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Rhodesia, Scotland, Singapore and Wales, with 135 athletes competing.173 An estimated 12,000 spectators attended the Games where they saw Australia top the medal tally with 38 gold medals, 29 silver medals and 23 bronze medals, with England coming second with 30 gold, 41 silver and nineteen bronze.174 Moretti, Robertson and Yeomans each won their events, bringing back a combined six gold medals, two silver medals and four bronze medals.175 Among the highlights were the star able-bodied athletes who attended including Olympians Murray Rose and Dawn Fraser.176

172 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 20.
174 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 20; and ‘Wheelchair Athletes at Perth’.
175 Mitchell, It Began with a Dream, p. 20.
176 ‘Wheelchair Athletes at Perth’.
From 1962 onwards, the pattern of games that the Paravics Club competed in was relatively set. Each year there was a Victorian Paraplegic Games held, while every second year saw the Australian Championships, with Paralympics and Commonwealth Games alternating on four year cycles as with their able-bodied cousins. Thus 1963 saw the second Victorian Paraplegic Games on 16 November at the Gowerville State School. Organized by Luke and Eva Zselenyi, the Games were ‘a great success’, with a now healthy Coombs coming back to win seven of the ten events that he was eligible in. Most notably, two events – singles and doubles in table tennis - were held for quadriplegics for the first time.

As the sporting competitions became increasingly formalised the need for coaching became more apparent. Zselenyi was one of the first people to act in this role for the Victorian athletes. Thornton remembers her as ‘the mover and shaker if you like’ and she showed him how to throw the javelin, shot put and discus among other things. Moretti recalls that Mike Wilson, a genial ‘sports freak’ also coached in a voluntary role. Wilson also assisted by bringing his engineering-minded father-in-law along to sessions, and while Wilson coached, his father-in-law mended wheelchairs and helped build new equipment. Meanwhile Tim Timmermans also coached the paraplegic and quadriplegic athletes in swimming.

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177 This and the following are from *Paravics Monthly Newsletter*, vol. 4, no. 13 (November 1963), cited in Wheelchair Sports Victoria (comp.), ‘And in the Beginning ...’, Melbourne: Wheelchair Sports Victoria, c. 1990, np.
178 Interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.
179 Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
180 Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
181 Robyn Wells, ‘These Babies (They’re Taught to Read While in Nappies)’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 1980, p. 72.
Records of the 1964 Victorian Games are missing, however it seems likely that at least two women competed – possibly the first time women had done so – for both Margaret Lester and Elaine Schreiber were selected in the Victorian team that competed in the National Championships in Adelaide in September.\(^{182}\) Like Dow, Schreiber was infected with polio as a child, in her case in Brisbane in 1951.\(^{183}\) Thus, as with Dow, her experience with the Paravics Sports Club was as an athlete, rather than also as someone in rehabilitation.

Lester was the opposite, and as one of the first women at the Austin’s Spinal Unit, she came up against a few barriers that the male patients there did not have to face. It is important to note that Lester was not the only female patient. During her recovery in Ward 17 (and later Ward 18) for example, Lester made friends with Mrs Viney, a middle-aged Tasmanian, who ‘on an afternoon’s outing to watch a football match, had been struck and made paraplegic by a falling goal-post’.\(^{184}\) Moreover, Helen Gillies who had become a paraplegic in 1954 when thrown out of a car, and was then on the Victorian Paraplegic Association’s Committee of Management also became a friend of Lester’s.\(^{185}\) And many of the male patients were supportive as well, with Lester becoming, like many, becoming an admirer of Ken Slater, who had a brilliant scholastic and sporting record, was paralysed in a car accident, but seemingly devoted all his waking hours to the welfare of disabled people.\(^{186}\)

\(^{182}\) This and the following are from *Paravics Monthly Newsletter*, vol. 5, no. 9 (October 1964), cited in *Wheelchair Sports Victoria* (comp.), ‘*And in the Beginning ...*’, Melbourne: Wheelchair Sports Victoria, c. 1990, np.


\(^{186}\) Epstein, *Mermaid on Wheels*, p. 80.
After being enthused by the stories of the 1960 Australian Paraplegic Games, Lester had taken a keen interest in the wheelchair sports that she observed in the reflector mirror of the acute ward where she could barely move. But when it came to her rehabilitation, Lester and the other women were offered darts on the veranda ‘while the men raced off to wheelchair basketball’. \(^{187}\) When Lester asked why she could not play basketball she was told that it was ‘Too rough, Margaret. It’s a man’s game’. Tired of darts, which she had never liked, Lester and a roommate called Dawn ‘badgered the staff until they were given permission to play with the men’. The staff were correct to a certain extent in that, as Lester admitted, it ‘was a rough and somewhat risky game, but it was tremendous fun’ as well. Lester also enjoyed table tennis, but soon discovered that it was swimming that she really excelled at. Soon she was part of the group of swimmers taken by Zselenyi and the Donvale auxiliary to the Box Hill Pool and it was at swimming that Lester was selected to represent Victoria at the 1964 Australian Championships.\(^{188}\) As Lester noted to the media, she had ‘no idea’ when watching wheelchair sports in her mirror while bedridden that ‘four years later I’d be in a team myself’.

Lester’s experience was emblematic of the transformation that a number of other patients at the Austin Hospital experienced. Bob Thornton, for example, remembers being inspired in 1964 by the deeds of athletes like Coombs, Moretti and Lucas –

\(^{187}\) This and the following are from Epstein, *Mermaid on Wheels*, pp. 88-89.

\(^{188}\) This and the following are from ‘Happy are the Brave’, publication unnamed and undated, p. 32 in *Paravics Monthly Newsletter*, vol. 3, no. 5 (May 1962), cited in Wheelchair Sports Victoria (comp.), ‘*And in the Beginning …*’, Melbourne: Wheelchair Sports Victoria, c. 1990, np.
even the fact that they could drive their cars in and out of the Austin was impressive to him and a sign that independence was possible.\textsuperscript{189}

Lester had a very successful Championship, winning three gold medals, though she was outshone by Schreiber and Dow who each won four. Other Victorians to win gold included Moretti with two, while Duckling, O’Connor and Robertson each won a single gold medal.\textsuperscript{190} Not surprisingly perhaps, Schreiber and Dow were both selected to represent Australia at the 1964 Paralympics that were being held in Tokyo.

In his award-winning essay, published in the \textit{International Journal of the History of Sport}, David Frost examines the background and impact of the 1964 Paralympic Games. He notes that Japan was not a country renowned for its treatment of the disabled, and yet it became the first nation outside Europe to host what were then officially known as the ‘Thirteenth International Stoke Mandeville Games for the Disabled’.\textsuperscript{191} In the end, it was an event which attracted ‘hundreds of athletes, thousands of spectators, widespread media attention, and major sponsorships’, and was widely hailed as a success with 375 athletes representing 21 countries, including Australia.\textsuperscript{192} Indeed it is estimated that over the course of their five days 100,000 spectators watched the Tokyo Games.\textsuperscript{193}

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\textsuperscript{189} Interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.
\textsuperscript{190} Paravics \textit{Monthly Newsletter}, vol. 5, no. 9 (October 1964).
\textsuperscript{192} Frost, ‘Tokyo’s Other Games’, pp. 620-21.
\textsuperscript{193} Whimpress, ‘Disabled Sportspersons’, p. 137.
\end{flushleft}
As such, Frost notes that ‘the Tokyo Paralympics also had a profound impact on the emerging Paralympic Movement by demonstrating the Movement’s growing international appeal, strengthening its association with the Olympic Games, and promoting an expanded multi-disability approach to disability sports’.\textsuperscript{194} In a wider and more political context, Frost also asserts that the Paralympics ‘served as an ideal arena for promoting the new, post-war Japan committed to peace and international goodwill’.\textsuperscript{195}

While Dow had been selected on the basis of swimming events – he had won all the swimming events he had competed in at the National Championships – he had to compete in a number of other events in Tokyo and remembers how hard it was to use the one wheelchair for events as different as sprints, long distance and slalom.\textsuperscript{196} Swimming however remained Dow’s strongest discipline, and he won two gold medals and a bronze at the pool to go with a silver medal at in the featherweight-lifting division. Schreiber meanwhile also won a gold medal at the club throw, along with a silver medal in the javelin and a bronze medal at table tennis.

Back home in Melbourne the media interest in the Tokyo Paralympics was considerably greater than that for the previous Paralympics in Rome.\textsuperscript{197} Not all this media was positive, however, with a number of articles focussing on the controversial

\textsuperscript{194} Frost, ‘Tokyo’s Other Games’, p. 620.
\textsuperscript{195} Frost, ‘Tokyo’s Other Games’, p. 634.
\textsuperscript{196} Interview with Michael Dow, 29 May 2012.
behaviour of some members of the Australian team. Nevertheless, most articles were encouraging, if small, stories of Australian success, and the language was more consistent and positive. For instance, unlike the Rome coverage no mention was made of ‘cripples’, but instead the term Paralympics recurred frequently, and there were celebrations of the gold medals won by ‘our paraplegics’.

The Tokyo Paralympics cemented the international games as the pinnacle of the sporting achievements possible for those living with severe spinal injuries. The ladder of prestige began with the Victorian Championships, and then stepped up to the Australian Championships, with then Commonwealth and Paralympics above them. However, for many members of the Paravics Sports Club it was the less formal so-called ‘Border Games’ which they remember most fondly.

Played at Mt Gambier against the South Australians and at Albury against the New South Wales contingent, the Border Games consisted of a weekend of fierce competition and revelry. Thornton recalls how the Victorians used to ‘race ourselves across to Mt Gambier’ like ‘hoons’ on Friday after lunch before coming home on Sunday afternoon after ‘a ripper of a weekend’. As the tradition of the Border Games developed the visiting teams developed a strong relationship with the local populace, with Lucas’ notes indicting that crowds exceeding 1,000 came to one clash at Mt Gambier. Thus while one achievement of the foundation years of disabled sport in Victoria was the establishment of a pathway for elite sport, another was the

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198 See, for example, ‘Paraplegics at Village’, *Herald*, 6 November 1964, p. 40.
199 See, for example, ‘Fourth Gold Medal to Our Paraplegics’, *Sun*, 12 November 1964, p. 62.
200 Interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.
development of sporting contests that while a site of intense rivalries, also marked the independence of the competitors (who could go away for a weekend by themselves) and were great social experiences where comradeship as well as competition was celebrated.
As with many others, Charles Ikstrums became involved with Paravics after a nasty car ‘prang’. Born in New South Wales, Ikstrums had grown up in Ballarat and ‘worked in hospitality most of the time, either worked or drank in hospitality I should say’. He had a restaurant in Gisborne and the crash occurred somewhere between Goulburn and Gisborne. Ikstrums remembers ‘sort of hanging upside down’ in the car while the emergency services cut him out; when they undid his seat he ‘dropped down’. As the ambulance sped towards the Austin hospital Ikstrums had this strong sensation that his ‘knees were sort of bent up and I couldn’t straighten them out’. Not realising that he could not feel his knees, Ikstrums kept telling the bemused ‘local copper in the back with me’ to help to push his legs out. After emergency surgery at the hospital Ikstrums was told he would never walk again. The next period was a lengthy stay in the acute ward, and then Ikstrums was put into a rehabilitation program and ‘pushed towards sport’.

The year was 1978, but much of Ikstrums treatment was comparable to the experiences of patients at the Austin’s Spinal Unit in the early 1960s. Herb Sanderson was still mixing his brand of enthusiasm and motivation with barked instructions, the physios remained ‘very keen’ on having the younger adults play sport, and Ikstrums ‘loved it’, especially the wheelchair basketball. It was ‘a bit daunting at the start, in the first seconds of the guys playing basketball they belt the tripe out of each other, but once you get into it I started doing the same thing’. Handling his wheelchair was

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This and the following are from an interview with Charles Ikstrums, 29 May 2012.
also daunting ‘you think you’ll never be able to go down stairs on the back wheels or manoeuvre it around, but yeah, you sort of master it’. There was even someone called Kevin Coombs still greeting and inspiring the newcome:

Coombsy was one of the first guys when you joined up who’d come over and say g’day, and he brought you into the place and made you feel at home. He was really good and just great to watch on the basketball court too. I mean for a fairly old guy he was still running rings around the young blokes, just a natural sort of thing.

The indefatigable Coombs would later receive recognition of his services to disability sport in a variety of ways, with an Order of Australia in 1988, the awarding of the Sir Ludwig Guttmann Perpetual Trophy in 1998, a place in the Australian Basketball Hall of Fame and the naming of an Avenue in his honour at Homebush Bay Olympic Stadium.202

Of course, much had changed as well. The head physiotherapist was now Don Perryman, Geoff Luke having left the Austin in 1966. Luke however, remained committed to the cause of rehabilitation through sport and arrived each year to renew his Paravics Sports Club membership and to be greeted by joyous cries of ‘Brother Rat’ from those who remembered him. Eva Zselenyi had left around the same time, while David Cheshire departed left six years later in 1972 to take up a position in

Phoenix in the United States of America, with his then Deputy David Burke taking over as the Director of the Austin Hospital’s Spinal Unit.\textsuperscript{203}

Although Coombs was still active, a change of the guard was also taking place in terms of the leading athletes at the Paravics. Bob Thornton, for example, was coming to the end of a successful career, winning numerous medals at the Australian Paraplegic Games including those in 1966, 1968 and 1972. His highlight however was his attendance at the inaugural Far East and South Pacific Games for the Disabled which were held in Japan in 1975. It was Thornton’s first trip on an aeroplane since his accident and his first trip ever overseas, and it was a ‘great’ experience, ‘a real adventure’ that was capped off by Thornton winning a gold medal in the javelin contest.\textsuperscript{204} By the late 1970s however Thornton was dropping out of sport in favour of other activities such as his involvement in the Masonic Lodge where he became an office bearer.

Margaret Lester had long since retired from sport. Though she represented Victoria again in the 1966 Australian Paraplegic Games, Lester spent most of her time working as an architect (having gone back to complete her studies after her accident), and bringing up her four children, though she remained an advocate for the rehabilitation and care of those with disabilities.\textsuperscript{205} In contrast, after taking a break from sport after another multiple-gold medal performance at the 1966 Australian Games, Michael Dow was about to return to national competition. In the intervening years Dow had

\textsuperscript{203} Burke and Porter, ‘Pioneer in Treating Spinal Injury Patients’, \textit{Age}, 23 December 1953, p. 15

\textsuperscript{204} Interview with Bob Thornton, 1 May 2012.

travelled overseas and married, but he would compete again in the Australian Paraplegic Games of 1979 and 1981 before retiring from competitive sport.\textsuperscript{206}

Like Dow, Robin Lucas had travelled overseas and married before returning to live in Wangaratta. Although Lucas ceased playing basketball, he continued to be actively involved, becoming a youth coach first in Heidelberg and then at Watsonia and Wangaratta where he also became involved in state basketball and was an assistant coach of the Victorian Under 14s girls team.\textsuperscript{207}

Bruno Moretti was also beginning to move into basketball coaching, although his focus was with wheelchair basketball as his celebrated athletic career was nearing its end. Moretti had won a gold medal and two silver medals at the 1968 Paralympics in Tel Aviv, but he was equally proud of the Victorian basketball team’s victory over Western Australia in the final of the 1972 Australian Paraplegic Games – the first time that the Western Australia had lost the national championship. As usual, Victoria were significant underdogs and Moretti remembers the victory as ‘a great experience’.

A long-time student of the tactics and strategies of basketball, Moretti had already been acting in something of a coaching role with the Victorian team, and so his transition to a more formal role seemed natural. Indeed, it was as a coach that Ikstrums came to know Moretti, who guided Ikstrums and the rest of the Australian team in the 1984 Paralympics before also retiring from sport.\textsuperscript{208}

\textsuperscript{206} Interview with Michael Dow, 29 May 2012.
\textsuperscript{207} Interview with Robin Lucas, 3 April 2012.
\textsuperscript{208} Interview with Bruno Moretti, 10 May 2012.
As with any organisation, especially centred at least in part around competition, there had been some tensions and difficulties in the time preceding Ikstrums’ arrival. In the aftermath of the 1964 Paralympics in Tokyo Dow had a disagreement with Cyril Thomas concerning excess baggage fees. On this basis, although he ended up paying the money, Dow believes that he and some other athletes were not selected for the 1966 Commonwealth Paraplegic Games in Jamaica. After winning two gold medals in world record time at the 1968 Australian Paraplegic Games, Dow was still not selected for that year’s Paralympics in Tel Aviv, and it was this non-selection among other factors, that led to Dow dropping out of competition for the next decade. 209

Two years later Moretti was also involved in a selection controversy when, after winning the award for ‘Best Male Athlete’ of the 1970 Australian Paraplegic Games, Moretti was not selected to go the Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh. It was a great disappointment, and enough to make Moretti cease playing for two years before returning in 1972. There was also at some time an incident between Elaine Schreiber and the Paravics Sports Club. Schreiber had continued dominating national competitions and participated in the 1968, 1972 and 1976 Paralympics, winning a silver medal with Marion O’Brien in the table tennis doubles event in 1968. However at a particular point Schreiber fell out with the Sports Club and as a consequence she chose not to be involved in this history project.

Although Ikstrums arrived at the end of an era, the sporting side of the Paravics remained very similar to that which had been established in the 1960s. Not only did Victorian competitions feed into national and then international games, but there was

209 Interview with Michael Dow, 29 May 2012.
still a cycle of other sporting events including Border Games, and exhibition wheelchair basketball contests against Victorian Football League teams and the Harlem Globetrotters. As Ikstrums says, ‘It was almost like a circuit. It had built up over the years’ and it just kept on going.\textsuperscript{210}

The circuit, however, was inevitably changing. In 1980 Sir Ludwig Guttmann had died of a coronary thrombosis. A compelling and heroic if also at times controversial and divisive figure, Guttmann’s legacy was celebrated in a United Nations initiative which made 1981 the International Year of Disabled Persons. Ikstrums and other members of the Paravics were able to use the year to help set up the Sports Club for the future, engaging in innovative fundraising campaigns and building strong relationships with the state and federal governments.\textsuperscript{211} At the same time, 1981 provided an ideal moment to celebrate the achievements of the past three decades. On one such occasion Australia’s Paralympic athletes were honoured at an Olympic Gold Medal Dinner, organized by the Primary Club of Australia, on 30 October 1981. In attendance at the dinner, were 45 of Australia’s living Olympic gold medal winners and 29 of the 31 gold medal winners at ‘Olympic Games for the Disabled’.\textsuperscript{212} It was a sign of just how far sport for those with severe spinal injuries had come, and the delegates were very deserving of the accolades being heaped upon them. Yet they were also undoubtedly aware of the immense works and inspiring deeds of all those who had made their achievements possible.

\begin{footnotes}

\footnotetext[210]{{\textsuperscript{210}} Interview with Charles Ikstrums, 29 May 2012.}
\footnotetext[211]{{\textsuperscript{211}} Interview with Charles Ikstrums, 29 May 2012.}
\end{footnotes}
A year later Ikstrums would also be involved in transforming the Paravics Sports Club into a more modern institution. The organization had continued to survive by the ‘skin-of-its-teeth’ and Ikstrums had a vision instead for an organization that was self-sufficient with a full-time administration base operated by full-time staff working in partnership with the volunteers who had sustained the Club in its first two decades.\textsuperscript{213} In 1982 the Paravics formally separated from the Victorian Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association.\textsuperscript{214} By this time Ikstrums was the Paravics Executive Officer and a new era was well and truly under way. Yet the central mission of the Club – the use of sport as a means of rehabilitation – would remain unchanged.

\textsuperscript{213} Interview with Charles Ikstrums, 29 May 2012.
\textsuperscript{214} Mitchell, \emph{It Began with a Dream}, p. 22.
Appendix 1

Recommendations
Acknowledgements

This manuscript is a testament to the assistance and commitment of a number of people, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude. We specifically wish to express our sincere appreciation to Rob Anderson (Chief Executive Officer, DSR) and Karla Wignall (Manager – Fundraising and Events, DSR) for entrusting this project to us, and for smoothing our path into the DSR community. In this vein, we also wish to pay tribute to our interviewees, the pioneers of DSR, who were the inspiration for this venture and are acknowledged by name in the text. We also extend thanks to Roy Hay, Gary Osmond, Janet Paisley, Daniel Spizzica, Rose Streatfeild, Nikki Wedgwood, Brenton Whale, and especially Carolyn Dew (from ‘The Torch Project’), for their encouragement, support and practical help at various stages of the project.

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October 2014
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