

Alicia Aberley

Rosemary Phillis & Judith Lewis

Riverstone's favourite paralympian, Alicia Aberley capped off a wonderful year in 2000 by being named the Blacktown City Council's sportsperson of the year. Former Riverstone High School student, sixteen year old Alicia contested seven events at the 2000 Paralympic games and won an amazing two silver and two bronze medals in the S14 category in swimming. No stranger to success, Alicia has held the 100m and 200m world record for breaststroke and won medals at state, national and international swimming competitions. On Sunday 3rd December 2000 we had the opportunity to talk with Alicia and ask her what it was like to take part in the Paralympic Games.

What were the real highlights of the games for you?

The opening ceremony and the 200 IM (Individual Medley). The medley was special because I was coming last but finished second. I started out with the two strokes that aren't my best, the backstroke and the fly and then came home with my two best.

Tell us what you remember about the opening ceremony.

They took us over to the stadium by bus and we joined the line outside. We were at the end of a queue as we were the last group to come in. It started to rain and the others started to put their wet weather stuff on and we said to them, "what are you doing that for, it's a special night".

As we were walking in the tunnel I could hear the crowd and the noise was deafening. When we walked through into the stadium I could feel the vibration from my toes all the way up to my head.

Were you one of the ones who took their mobile phone in with you?

No, I left my phone back on the charger, but when I got back, there were 37 calls on waiting! I took my mobile to the closing ceremony and my cousin rang me to ask where I was. I had two balloons and had to wave them so that they could see me.

What was life like in the village?

It was good, it felt like you were free, but you weren't really, there was a lot of security.

There were different parts to the village, each with a different name. We were in the section known as Red Koala. There were fourteen girls in our house, all swimmers and I shared a room with Amanda Fraser from Queensland.

They had an athletes' lounge where you could watch TV or videos. We had a television in our house, but it was an old one. The boys had a modern one in their house, so we went up to watch Foxtel and relax. I stayed at the village the whole time, my family wasn't able to visit but I would see them before I swam each day.

What was the food like?

It was good, it was all free, including the Macca's but because I was competing I was eating like a sparrow, a bit of pasta every now and then. It was so hard to keep walking past all that food, I waited until the end of competition then had two big donuts!

Did you mix with competitors from the other countries?

We weren't supposed to sit with the others at the dining table, but I did anyway. They were worried that the others might try and psych us out but it wouldn't work with me. I wouldn't sit with anyone who would try to psych me out. I try to be friends with people out of the pool, but in the pool they are the enemy.

What was a typical day?

I'd get up about 6.30. You don't do training when you are at an event, you just swim in the competition. The finals were at night, so during the day I'd try and sleep, but I couldn't so I'd watch TV and try and relax.

What was it like competing at the Aquatic Centre?

The first day I was warming up and I could hear the people cheering in the main part and thought to myself, "wow, they'll be cheering for me soon".

Does the cheering and all the support help?

Yes, it brings you home, when you hear the crowd roar you think that someone is coming up on you and you try harder.

Did you feel nervous?

I wasn't nervous, just excited during the games. Once I was in the water I'd feel confident.

Did you expect to win gold?

I'd always aim for gold and initially I was disappointed with bronze in the first race, but (and she said this with a smile) I adapted.

What events did you win your medals in?

I won silver in the 200m IM and the 100m freestyle and bronze in the 50m breaststroke and the 200m freestyle.

What was it like being up on the dais?

Great, when Siobhon got the gold it meant they played Advance Australia Fair and we both sang along. A few of the media said to us "you've got good voices". We told them that they weren't supposed to hear us as we tried to tone it down.

The medals you have there are larger than they look on television, are they heavy?

Yes, especially when you put them all on.

What did you do with the flowers?

I kept one bunch and it's mounted in a frame at home. I gave one bunch to Nan, one to a friend whose birthday was on the day I won and the other one to another friend.

You also get a badge saying "Medal Winner" with the flowers, and I've kept those.

Did you know that you are one of the few people from the district to compete at the Olympics or Paralympics? John Maxwell competed in the Olympics and Eric Magennis in the Paralympics.

I met Eric before I went to compete in Perth in 1996 which was really good. He gave me some nice advice which was basically if you've done a PB (personal best) it is a good result and a medal is a bonus. It would be nice to see him again and to show him my medals.

Were you aware of the support that you had locally? There was a sign up at Marketown with your events and a sign at the Infants School.

Yes, I got a lot of support for the Paralympics from sponsors such as the Elite Fitness at Castle Hill, Riverstone-Schofields RSL, Bowling Club, PAP Printing and the patrons of the Riverstone Hotel and family and friends. A number of the local shops were great, donating things to be raffled to raise money. Southern Cross Flags at Windsor even donated a flagpole and flag to go in our front yard. During the Paralympics the Riverstone Hotel had the big screen TV tuned in to the ABC each night at 5.30. I would really like to say thanks to all of the Riverstone local community for supporting me in the Paralympics.

How did you start with swimming?

I learnt to swim with the Riverstone Dolphins when I was ten and started squad training when I was eleven. Riverstone High School approached me to go to the trials for the multi disability events at the Pacific School Games. I was selected and competed in the competition at Perth when I was twelve. I won eleven gold medals and broke nine national records. Anne Green, the National Co-ordinator for disability swimming suggested that I should join a disability swimming organisation, as she could see I had a big future. I did and started competing in events and was selected to join the Australian Paralympic Preparation Squad.

So what next for you, we understand that you will be going to TAFE to study travel.

That's right. I'll also be going overseas next year, I'm not sure to where, it depends who they select and where they want to send us. In 2002 there will be the World Championships in Argentina and the first Commonwealth Games with multi disability events will be held in Manchester. In 2004 the next Paralympic Games will be held in Athens.

Siobhon is your main rival at the moment, how old is she and is she going to continue to compete?

She is seventeen and is going to continue on.

What is your overall memory of the games?

It was like a dream, like I fell asleep, dreamt of the Olympics and then they were over and I woke up.

Did you take part in the Ticker tape parade in the City?

Yes, it was really good. I didn't expect there to be as many people as there were. Some of the people rode in cars, but we walked. I was walking along with Siobhon and people kept yelling out her name.

The gold medallists had to go around Australia to parades in other cities, but there were only forty two spots and some of the sponsors went rather than medallists. I'd get phone calls from some of my friends saying they were in such and such and "you should see the motel we're in".

What was it like back at high school?

The first day back they had decorated the windows of three of the classrooms facing the assembly line with the words "Congratulations Alicia".

They had a special assembly for me. Mr Minton had taken photos of my certificates and put them onto a disk with music and put them on an overhead projector in the auditorium, showing my achievements over the years. That was really the best thing.

It was good to be able to show the other students in the school what pupils from the Special Education Class can do, as they sometimes put us down. I used to be down when I was in Primary school, but a coach when I was at Hornsby said to me "you've got to be positive Alicia and try and make people happy" and that's what I do.

After the interview Alicia happily showed everyone her medals and posed for photos. She is one of the nicest people you will meet and a wonderful representative for Australia.

