

## Profile Matthew Fittolani



It was 12 December 1997, and I was up early to lay a roof in Wonga Park. I was a plumber and gasfitter at the time, and the forecast was for a hot summer's day, so we started early. The job went well. It was dangerous up on the roof with all the sweat making things slippery, so we finished by about 11.30am. As one of my favourite houses was on the way home, I packed up my gear and my dog General and we set off in that direction.

We were about half way there when the back left tyre on my van blew out. I lost control and the van careered off the side of the road, smashing into a cluster of trees. I remember everything. The first tree snapped off and crashed over the roof. Unfortunately for me, the second tree was much bigger and did not give way. With the force of the impact, the front of the van crushed into my lower limbs. My right ankle snapped and became stuck in the driver's door, my left foot was crushed, my left femur was broken, and I partially severed my femoral artery when part of the van speared into me.

After the initial shock and time spent trying to free myself from the wreckage, the pain was too much. I sat and waited for someone to call for help, which didn't take too long. I was trapped for about 45 minutes, and if not for the efforts of the Nunawading heavy rescue unit, I wouldn't be here today. Unfortunately, the SES and CFA waited too long to call for assistance. By the time the big boys turned up, I had lost too much blood for the Alfred Hospital's doctors to save my leg.

Three days later, my father signed his consent for amputation of the better part of my leg. After my surgery, 8cm of femur remained; my leg was effectively removed at the hip. I hate the fact that my father had to make that decision. Nobody should have to decide such things for the people they love. Still, the staff at the Alfred was absolutely fabulous and very supportive.

I came out of an induced coma about five days later, not really understanding what had happened due to the cocktail of pain killing drugs I was given.

My rehab commenced six weeks later at Caulfield General Medical Centre.

I spent the next ten weeks doing very little other than watching daytime television and spending time with my (then) girlfriend, friends and family. I still had open wounds and was unable to bear weight on my right foot. I had been such an active person prior to my accident, so I found this time extremely difficult.

Without the support of these people, I doubt that I would have emerged from rehab in the best frame of mind. I decided that I had two ways of looking at my situation: I could either feel sorry for myself and never leave the house again, or I could make the most out of my life. I decided very early to go with the second option.

In the later part of my rehab, I was fitted with a prosthesis that had a hip and knee joint. Unfortunately, the ankle fracture I sustained in my accident made it impossible for me to 'toe off' with enough clearance for my new left foot to travel through the gait cycle. The technicians had no choice but to shorten that leg. Having one leg longer than the other made it difficult to stand still. The size and weight of the limb – and the fact that it had to be removed for each toilet visit – led to my choice of a wheelchair for mobility.

For me, life is about passion, and the four things that I have remained passionate about are family, friends, football and water skiing (in that order). I have never pursued wheelchair sports, as I have been able to continue participating in the sports that I enjoyed prior to my injury. Still, I have faced many challenges along the way.

Take football, for example. Since my accident, I have been developing my ability to coach people of all ages to play a sport that I love. I have an excellent track record with various leagues and clubs, but I haven't been able to secure a coaching job at a football club unless I already had a friend involved with that club. Without a coaching position for 2008, it now looks like I will be moving into retirement, which is a real shame as I still have so much to give. From my perspective, the only point of difference between me and the other coaching candidates has been my wheelchair. It's a long story and I cannot elaborate for legal reasons, but I was effectively banned from coaching football on the sidelines because of the potential danger to players posed by my chair. I have pursued it with the Equal Opportunity Commission and the Federal Court. My message is that you should never give up on something that you love to do. If I had given up, what would happen to the next person in my position and the person after that, and so on? This has been my greatest challenge since being in a chair.

As for water skiing, I still ski on a slalom ski. My mind is willing but the body won't keep up. My family is a tremendous support, and my circle of friends is becoming smaller but more important as I get older.

I have put myself through six years of university and graduated (with distinction) with a Bachelor of Applied Science (Human Movement Studies) and a postgraduate qualification in exercise for rehabilitation. As a qualified exercise physiologist, I now run my own business called 'Functional Training Perspectives Group'. We provide exercise and activity for people who suffer from chronic conditions and require complex care. We work with veterans and people who have injured themselves at work and are assisted by Medicare, WorkCover, DVA and private health insurers.

Unfortunately, TAC only uses our service for rehab in hospitals, rather than in the general community. I think that community-based fitness centres would help people with injuries integrate back into the community through physical activity and social participation.

After my accident, my relationship with my girlfriend at the time ended, but I have since met a wonderful woman called Narelle. We have been married for about four years now and we have a beautiful 21 month old boy named Jet. He is my whole world and life, and nothing makes me smile more than when he comes running to me after a day at work screaming 'Daddy!', and wanting a kiss and a cuddle. Jet and my wife are my rocks, and they keep me striving to continually improve and get better at everything I do, because I do it for them.

*Matthew Fittolani*



**1300 782 231**

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