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Life changing— Invictus Games

The **Invictus Games** is an international adaptive sporting event for wounded, injured and ill service men and women, both active and veteran. The Games, to be held in Sydney later this month, use the healing power of sport to inspire recovery, support rehabilitation and celebrate the crucial role played by family members and friends. Sue Barker, APAM, Keren Faulkner, FACP, and Corporal Sonya Newman, give their perspective on what the Games means to them. Skye Mitchell reports.

Corporal Sonya Newman will be participating in her second Invictus Games after going to Toronto last year.

Sonya is now in her 18th year with the Australian Defence Force and in her second year as an Invictus participant. Sonya says it was her hierarchy who suggested that she apply. 'They just handed me the paperwork and said "we'd think you'd be good at this, so give it a go".' That is exactly what she did, and after a 'life-changing experience' last year in Toronto, she could not pass up the opportunity to be a part of the Games in Australia.

This year Sonya will be competing in swimming, wheelchair basketball and volleyball.

In 2014, after experiencing knee problems, Sonya underwent a routine arthroscopy, from which she developed a staph infection. This

minor surgery triggered over two years of surgeries on her right knee and many hours of physiotherapy. Sonya lived through numerous cleanout surgeries and had three total knee replacements in that time. 'They [the surgeries] all failed and eventually they attempted to fuse my knee ... that didn't work either and then we opted for amputation,' she says. Sonya had an above the knee amputation in 2016, two years after her initial surgery.

'Right from the amputation and learning to walk was so much work with the physios in Sydney, but even before then with the three total knee replacements. I spent months with physios at St Luke's Hospital. I also have a lot of issues with my lower back and my left knee, so I spent a lot of time working to prevent further injuries, and continuously trying to correct my gait so I'm putting less stress on my back, and also my left knee.'

Sonya was a very active child and her career in defence required her to have a certain level of fitness. 'I have been relatively fit most of my life, but I think with the amounts of surgeries and the time away from home...being in a wheelchair and in hospitals regardless of what your mind status is like, you do end up in a sort of state of depression. It is just one of those things, and especially it is fairly common for defence personnel,' she says.

Once the Invictus program paperwork was pushed in front of Sonya, she made a choice to get back to fitness for both her physical and mental wellbeing. 'The Invictus program gave me the motivation to get out of bed every day

while I was in hospital. I would exercise six to eight hours a day in the hospital gym. I made that my thing. It was something that I could stay focused on and move forward with.'

Sue Barker and the physiotherapy team for the Australian participants have helped Sonya throughout the Invictus program. Says Sonya: 'My back played up very significantly on the plane last year. I have a clear memory of Sue sitting on my seat, while I'm lying across the foot well and she was leaning over and working on my back—she went over and above to make sure I was relatively comfortable, and I was going to hit the ground in a state where I could compete.'

'The medical team could have easily just pumped me full of pain killers instead and just said "we'll fix you up when we land", but the physios were fantastic for everybody.'

Sonya understands that she may be working with physiotherapists for the rest of her life and says that she owes her total wellbeing to them. 'If I don't look after myself, I won't be able to walk ... it is that simple. I think, as much as people think that they might have exhausted their time with physios, for me now, with the benefit of hindsight, I would have much preferred to continue to work with physios,' she says. When Sonya talks to people about their injuries now, she tries to encourage them to do more work with physiotherapists and to explore different options before seeing a surgeon. 'I think people seem to be very focused on the miracle fix, or the quick fix. Everyone runs off to their GP and I think people probably just need to find a good physio that they can work with.'

Sonya also has her daily struggles and finds being in crowds quite confronting, but she says that being in the team environment during Invictus and the spirit of every other team member and competitor helps her overcome these mental barriers. 'We are all just normal everyday people—we are not highly trained athletes or anything like that. A percentage of us have a goal that we are working toward, but we are just everyday people. To see some of the guys who have significant physical challenges overcome that and do amazing things...it changes your life...to watch that. It will change your life.'

Sonya's unexpected encounter with Prince Harry

'I just finished one of my races in Toronto and after the medal presentation I was racing back for the next event. I was in my wheelchair and I came screaming around this corner and there was this black curtain up for photography. It just went into this corridor so I didn't think anything of it. As I went around the corner, Prince Harry was standing right behind the black curtain and I nearly ran him over. He had to step back because I actually nearly cleaned him right up. And I said "even though I pretty much just almost killed you, do you think I can get ... ah ... a photo?"'



Image Supplied by Sonya Newman

APA member Sue Barker is a Royal Australian Air Force physiotherapist and the current head physiotherapist for the Australian team at the Invictus Games.

Sue decided that she needed some new challenges after her children finished school and joined the defence force. 'I've been a specialist reservist flight lieutenant for seven years. I went into defence as a way of giving back to the community,' she says.

Essentially, Invictus is a rehabilitation program—a rehabilitation program through a sporting competition, therefore, physiotherapists are crucial members of the team. This year saw 150 injured, ill or wounded, current and ex-serving defence force members training to make the team of 72, which were named in June. All 150 competitors were assessed by the physiotherapists at the beginning of the year to identify any acute or chronic problems.

'It's [Invictus] a 10-month program, which is about building up their training program gradually and avoiding overuse injury. Most of the competitors are doing more than one sport so it is really important to have ongoing communication between the physios and the coaches to monitor the workloads, prevent injury prevention self-manage injuries.'

There are various Invictus 'hubs' around the country with individual sporting events being in different locations, for example, cycling in Adelaide, swimming in Melbourne and team sports in Sydney. 'The competitors are doing most of their training in their own towns so they need to be able to manage their own bodies when we are not around,' she says.

'We were initially looking after 150 people and managing their injuries and their expectations down to the 72 who were named in June. We have been treating a wide variety of injuries, both physical and mental health issues. Physical issues range from spinal cord, amputations, and multiple musculoskeletal problems, as well as illnesses such as cancers, brain tumours and other health issues; you also have your post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety with all the mental health problems.'

Sue treats participants who come from all over the country, from all different exercise backgrounds, some having not actively exercised for many years. 'It was really important, particularly for those who haven't exercised in recent years, that we tried to prevent and manage their injuries so they can continue to actually compete and get the most out of the program,' she says. This year, Sue has focused on education programs for injury prevention after seeing overuse injuries during last year's Invictus program. 'There's lots of ongoing education and it's [overuse injury] much less of a problem this time. The good news is that so far this year everyone is tracking really well and there's no major injuries that look like they will impact on Games performance,' she says.

Sue was appointed physiotherapy subject matter expert and implemented a baseline screening program, which will provide data to measure improvements across the duration of the Games. Sue and the team put together a testing protocol that included difference exercises, measurements, and questionnaires, screening participants four times across the year.

Another important role for Sue is categorisation. 'Working out what category the competitor is in is really vital to not only the competitors, but also to the coaches, so they can choose the right people for the right team to place in the right events.' Every sporting event has a different categorisation code and it is important to make sure the competitors are placed into the category most suited to their function level. In the past, Sue has been involved with looking after international sporting teams and the Olympics, but she says that nothing has been as inspirational or rewarding as the Invictus program.

'I've been doing this now for two years and to see someone who couldn't look anyone in the eye, or have a conversation, or stand straight and by the end of the year be confident enough to have a chat to Prince Harry and laugh with the group and stand tall is amazing.'

Sue says that Invictus is unlike any sporting event. 'We all say "life-changing", but it really is ... it really is.'

Keren Faulkner, FACP, is a volunteer physiotherapist as a part of the medical services team at Invictus headquarters and across sport venues.

'Sometimes I question my ethics in choosing a career in sports physiotherapy. Sport has always been a passion and source of enjoyment for me, but is it really contributing to a better world? I balance my doubts with the knowledge that sport promotes a healthy community and encourages people to be active for optimal physical and mental health,' Keren says.

In the Invictus Games, participation is prioritised over performance, sport is used for rehabilitation and recovery and family support is recognised and celebrated. Medal tallies are taboo and finishing might be valued more than winning. 'These games are a showcase for recreational sport's contribution to society. In the way that we are recognising the pathway of sport more, the Invictus Games is a celebration of this pathway and the role of sport in everyday life,' she says.

Keren says that having been invited to join a medical advisory group for Invictus Games as a volunteer, she went along ready and keen to impart some of the knowledge and experience gained as a sports physiotherapist at two Olympic Games, two Paralympic Games and three Commonwealth Games. 'Fortunately, along the way, I have learnt to listen a bit and so I quite promptly found that my experiences were relatively small fry. I have enjoyed the opportunity to work alongside a diverse group of people from military operations, sports medicine and veteran health backgrounds.'

All Invictus Games competitors have been wounded, injured or ill during, or as a direct result of, their service. The aim of the Games is to support them in their recovery. There are a range of impairments eligible for categorisation including mental health, physical health and vision impairments, which requires a unique approach to medical services.

Physiotherapists will be on hand at all training and competition sessions. The range of issues encountered could be vast. 'This has been my previous experience with para-sport. One day might involve supporting an athlete into ideal posture for pushing a wheelchair, and the next could be running a yoga session for athletes who cannot stand up,' she says.

'Adaptive sport equipment provides a great opportunity for physiotherapists to impact sport performance. The interface between the athlete and their equipment is key to supporting posture, distributing load, minimising shear and providing sensory input. Physiotherapists are well positioned to understand sport, posture and function and so by getting involved in equipment prescription, design, fitting and skill development we can make positive impacts.'



I always work with a multidisciplinary team when making equipment changes to ensure best outcomes and the Invictus Games will have prosthetists, orthotists and sports engineers to support participants.'

In terms of sports injury management, the volunteer physiotherapy team will be preparing to treat a lot of shoulder pain.

'When wheelchair users travel, they face challenging transfers—think about getting into an airline bathroom—different bathroom accessibility and less ideal sleep. Combined with an increased incidence of neck pain related to long haul flying, this provides the perfect storm for shoulder injury.

Leg amputee athletes have shown to walk significantly further than they usually do when living in a village situation as they need to walk to communal dining and transport areas.

'This increase in walking can lead to skin breakdown around their stump, stump pain and altered gait. The physiotherapy volunteer team will work with amputee athletes to minimise injury risk and seek early treatment,' Keren says.

'I am hoping that our team at the Games will be enthusiastic supporters of the Games' principles. They will step up, get involved and promote the spirit of Invictus. The word Invictus was chosen for it is reference to being "unconquered" and every participant will be there to celebrate the fact that they can use sport to show their abilities. I am sure that I will leave these Games with no doubt that I am contributing to something truly great on a global scale.'

Every APA member can be involved. Keren hopes that the physiotherapy team at Invictus Games will be enthusiastic supporters of the values and mission of the Games and help spread the Invictus spirit among their own networks.

'I am looking forward to the Games and cannot wait to share the experience with our physiotherapy volunteers.'

**Follow the Games on Twitter @InvictusSydney
and visit invictusgames2018.org.**

Sydney Invictus Games at a glance

500 Competitors: All competitors will be active duty or veteran service members from participating nations who have become wounded, injured or ill during or as a direct consequence of their service.

18 Nations: Afghanistan, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States.

8 days of competition:
20–27 October 2018.

Sports: Archery, athletics, indoor rowing, Jaguar Land Rover driving challenge, powerlifting, road cycling, sitting volleyball, sailing, swimming, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair tennis and wheelchair rugby.

1000 Volunteers:
The Invictus Games Sydney 2018 will be supported by 1000 enthusiastic and passionate volunteers including 20 APA sports physiotherapists.

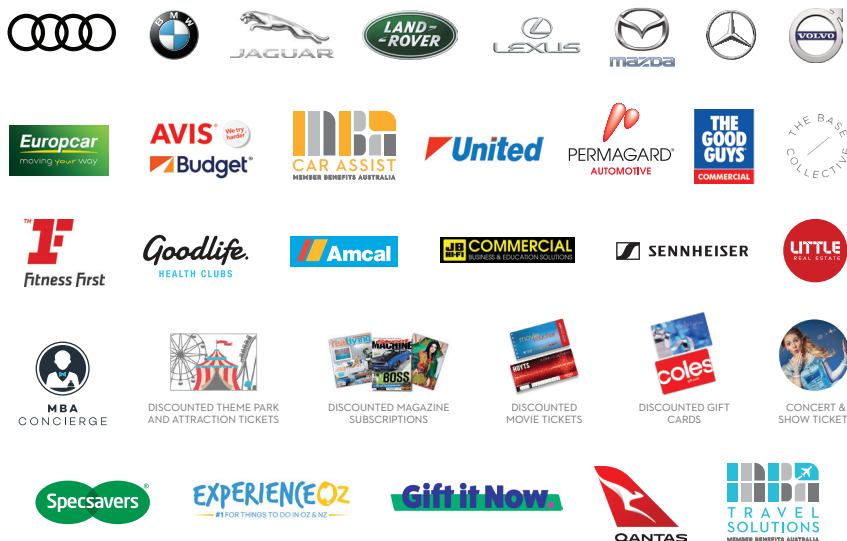


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