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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Rio 2016 Paralympic Games

SPEECH

Monday, 7 September 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Prentice, Jane, MP

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Mrs PRENTICE (Ryan) (12:28): I second the motion. I thank the member for Newcastle for moving this motion, a motion that I am sure will enjoy the support of all members of this House. It seems like only yesterday that we were farewelling athletes about to head to London for the 2014 Olympic and Paralympic games. Back then, I attended the Australian Paralympic team's launch ceremony at Parliament House. There I had the opportunity to meet young stars such as University of Queensland alumnus Bridie Kean. Bridie was captain of the women's wheelchair basketball team, the Gliders. I also met Dylan Alcott, a member of the men's wheelchair basketball team, the Rollers. Both teams went on to represent Australia with distinction in London and both won silver medals. In total, 161 Australian athletes went to London as part of the Australian Paralympic team. Between them, they achieved outstanding success, resulting in 85 medals, including 32 gold medals. This was the biggest gold medal success since the 2000 Sydney Olympics and was strong enough to place Australia fifth on the overall medal tally.

Among the team were some standout performances, particularly in the pool. Swimmer Matthew Cowdrey cemented his status as an Australian sporting legend by picking up another eight medals, including five gold medals. That took his overall medal tally to 13 gold medals—the most of any Paralympian in Australian history. Another swimmer, Ellie Cole, won four gold medals and two bronze medals. At the age of 13, swimmer Maddison Elliott became the youngest ever Australian gold medallist.

But arguably the star of the games was Brisbane-born swimmer Jacqueline Freney. Jacqueline won an outstanding eight gold medals, the most ever won by an Australian at a single Olympics. This included gold medals in six individual events: 100 metres backstroke, 50 metres butterfly, 200 metres individual medley, 100 metres freestyle, 50 metres freestyle and 400 metres freestyle. She was also part of the successful four by 100 metres women's freestyle and four by 100 metres medley relay teams.

In 2012 a total of 18 Queenslanders participated in their first Paralympics, and no doubt Rio 2016 will present an opportunity for more Queenslanders to participate for the first time. One such participant may well be 26-year-old paracanoeist Curtis McGrath. Every athlete has a story to tell about how they got to where they are, but few stories are as compelling as that of Curtis McGrath. In August 2012, the same month as the 2012 Paralympics opened in London, Sapper Curtis McGrath was a combat engineer with the Army's 6th Engineer Support Regiment based in Brisbane. Sapper McGrath was serving in Oruzgan province, leading a team, when he inadvertently stood on an improvised explosive device, or IED. Despite extensive injuries to his legs, he miraculously survived, but the injuries rendered him a double leg amputee.

Curtis's Paralympic ambition began that day. He later shared with the *Gold Coast Bulletin* newspaper that even as he was being stretchered from the site of the blast he was telling his colleagues that he would become a Paralympian one day. After months of rehabilitation, I was honoured to be present when he rejoined his mates at the welcome home parade at Gallipoli Barracks at Enoggera. He then dedicated himself to his chosen sport of paracanoeing, which will appear for the first time at the 2016 Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro. Having won gold medals in his class at the 2014 and 2015 world championships, Curtis stands a good chance of making the team. To raise money to make it to Rio next year, he is being supported by Mates4Mates, a charity dedicated to the rehabilitation of current and ex-serving ADF members who have suffered physical or psychological wounds. Mates4Mates have set up a fundraising page to help Curtis fulfil his Paralympic dream, and have raised more than \$8,000 so far in aid of his cause.

The motion makes note of Chef de Mission Kate McLoughlin, who will become the first woman to lead an Australian team at a summer Paralympic Games. It is hoped that she will lead a 170-strong team to the Rio Paralympics, which would be the largest team since the Paralympics were held on home soil in Australia back in 2000. Members of the Australian Paralympic team are tremendous role models for all Australians. As mainly amateur athletes, they represent the original Olympic ideals and compete for glory and for their country, their team and themselves without the promise of extensive financial reward. I join with the member for Newcastle

and the rest of this House in wishing all aspiring Paralympians the very best as they make their final preparations for Rio next year.