



Paddle pop star

Robin Bell (BEC '07) is a typical kid from Perth – and an Olympic and world champion canoeist.

Diana Simmonds reports

Robin Bell, world champion slalom canoeist and Sydney University Male Blue of the Year (2005), is one of Australia's finest athletes, not that you'd know it from the mainstream media – even though he not only looks like a movie star but also is as charming as fellow West Australian, Hugh Jackman.

Bell is accustomed to the low profile of his chosen sport (despite the torturous events on the Tasman earlier this year). Anonymity for Olympic and champion paddlers comes with the territory, apparently.

"We didn't get a coach until 1998," he says of the Australian paddling team. "We trained but we had no focus, no goals, we were teaching ourselves really."

The Sydney Olympics of 2000 brought a bit of money floating in as Australian sports administrators began looking for potential medallists. It also brought the man Bell calls "the guru of the sport" – British coach Richard Fox – into his orbit.

"He invented a lot of the moves we do now," Bell explains. "And he taught us to think strategically – not just go out on the water and see what happens."

Bell was a typical kid growing up in Perth: he surfed, rock-climbed, played football, baseball, T-ball and hockey and generally knocked around with a bunch of mates with little thought of anything but fun.

"I wasn't serious. We lived between Perth and Freo and I had a normal childhood. My parents split – that's pretty normal – and I'm in the middle between two sisters and it was pretty free-ranging."

After he outgrew the upper reaches of the Swan river and began showing the potential that would take him to the top 10 in the world of paddling, Bell looked east both for his water-borne and tertiary education.

"I have been very fortunate with help and great support from everyone at Uni Sport," says Bell. "I wouldn't

have been able to cope with training and doing my degree without them. They've helped me organise tutes and liaise with lecturers and so on because what you might not realise is that the really hard part of the racing season – when I'm training constantly – is right in the middle of uni."

Bell has now graduated (Bachelor of Economics '07) and his sights are set on the Beijing Olympics after a disappointing season ("it's up and down, sometimes you can train so hard you get sick and that's the trap for a lot of athletes") and a long hard comeback campaign.

"After the Olympics – if I get there – I'll look to my career beyond paddling," says Bell. "I trained hard for Athens and was very disappointed with the result. I was gutted, actually, and I didn't look at the canoe for six months. Then I got back into it and after a quiet year it began to come together. The important part of sport is to have something else – it puts it into perspective."

Now he's ramping up his program and sights for Beijing, spending a lot of time travelling to competitions and even more time at the former Olympic course at Penrith in western Sydney – now known as Penrith Whitewater.

"It's brilliant," he says of the unique landlocked facility. "It's still setting the world standard. They got the dimensions right. It was one of the first built and it's either very skilfully done or they lucked out with the water volume and width ratio."

Bell has reconnoitred the Beijing facility and says it's good. "They've pumped a huge amount of money into it, but it's different from Sydney or Athens where the designers tried to help the athletes. In Beijing it's about showcasing China."

According to Bell, China is not the only nation to be struck by the edifice complex. "Some European courses have gone the American route and sacrificed subtlety for size," he says. "Bigger isn't necessarily better when it

sport



comes to slalom, it doesn't work so well."

This is also true of other elements of paddling, Bell has discovered. When he and his paddle-mates first headed for Europe they were amazed by what they found.

"We'd rock up to the Worlds or something like that and these teams would have all this amazing gear and all these facilities. The Germans had four coaches each, for instance, and we had our backpacks and a tent!"

Bell is not convinced about the gear even if he does appreciate having a world-renowned coach. "It's usually the ones who are just off the pace, just off the team, who are looking for that little bit extra in the gear," he says. "If everything is going well for you the gear isn't the point. It's a bit like surfing – you learn to use the water and it seems easy – then it takes a really long time to get good at it."

Such is life. SAM