

# white hot



At the 2018 Winter Paralympics, two of the Australian team of 12 skiers and snowboarders were from the Southern Highlands. Melissa Perrine and Sam Tait are both spending much of this winter in Perisher, training to compete at Beijing 2022. ALEX SPEED spoke to Melissa Perrine in Mittagong and HUW KINGSTON met Sam Tait in Perisher.

## Melissa Perrine

**T**HERE IS BRAVE and then there is fearless. Paralympian skier Melissa Perrine is the latter. One of Australia's most successful female para-alpine skiers, Mel, as she is known, has less than five per cent vision. Yet with nerves of steel, she regularly hurtles around poles and down mountains at speeds exceeding 100 kilometres per hour.

Mel, who has had a top five world ranking for a decade, won a gold, two silvers and a bronze medal at the 2019 World Para Alpine Skiing Championships in Slovenia, and was the 2019 Female Para Athlete of the Year at the Australian Institute of Sport's Sport Performance Awards. She won two bronze medals

at the 2018 Paralympic Winter Games at PyeongChang, South Korea and was the Australian team's flagbearer for the closing ceremony.

Aiming for a podium place at her fourth Paralympic Winter Games in March 2022 in Beijing, Mel has spent the past four winters commuting from Mittagong to Jindabyne. As she is visually impaired, she travels via public transport and with the help of friends and family. At Perisher she trains with the tight-knit para-alpine team, which includes Sam Tait, a good mate.

"From the second week of July, I am down in Jindabyne three days a week and up here [in Mittagong] working three days a week," says Mel, 33, during a lunch break at Mittagong Physiotherapy and Pilates, where she has worked as a physio

“Skiing is just exhilarating. It’s like the biggest adrenaline rush on the face of the planet.”



MELISSA PERRINE AND SAM TAIT IN MITTAGONG, SHORTLY BEFORE THE START OF THE SKI SEASON (PHOTOGRAPH TONY SHEFFIELD).

**OPPOSITE PAGE** MELISSA IN THE PARA-ALPINE COMBINED AT THE PYEONGCHANG 2018 PARALYMPIC GAMES (PHOTOGRAPH PARALYMPICS AUSTRALIA)



ABOVE MELISSA AND GUIDE BOBBI KELLY (PHOTOGRAPH LUC PERCIVAL).

BELOW BRONZE MEDALLISTS MELISSA AND GUIDE CHRISTIAN GEIGER AT THE 2018 WINTER PARALYMPICS (PHOTOGRAPH PARALYMPICS AUSTRALIA).

since 2018. Mel studied at Western Sydney University and the University of Sydney and has a Masters in Physiotherapy and Exercise Science.

“I am also physio for the senior Mittagong Lions Rugby League team, so I am with those guys on game days and training on Thursday nights. Then I get Saturdays off sometimes.”

Mel, who was born blind, competes in the Giant Slalom and Slalom under a B2 visually impaired classification, which means she has less than five per cent overall vision. “I see shapes and colours,” she explains. “I have no depth perception so I see the world in 2D as if I was looking at a photograph basically. If I am walking up and down a set of stairs that don’t have markings, I think it’s a ramp.

“I can read print and I am an obsessive reader, but anything beyond 30cm gets blurry, and anything beyond three to five metres doesn’t exist in my world. My peripheral vision is pretty poor... so I am actually incredibly blind.”

She uses a cane to help get around, although never in Mittagong, “because I’ve lived here for 30-odd years and know it like the back of my hand”. She skis with sighted guide Bobbi Kelly, her first female guide, who she began working with in 2018.

Mel and Bobbi, a ski instructor and race coach, communicate via Bluetooth headsets in their helmets. Bobbi skis in front, detailing the twists and turns; Mel follows metres behind.

“I have never skied without a guide,” Mel says. “It’s a massive relationship I have with my guides because I trust them with my life, and they trust me with theirs; we can both seriously hurt each other.”



Mel made her international debut in 2009 with her guide, Andy Bor, winning silver at the IPC North America Cup in Colorado. She was named alongside the para-skier, now para-rower, Jessica Gallagher for the Australian team at the 2010 Vancouver Paralympics. It was only the second time Australia had sent women to the Winter Paralympics.

In 2011, Mel became the first Australian female para-alpine skier to win a medal at the World Championships, claiming the silver in Downhill at Sestriere in Italy, but at the 2014 Paralympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, she was disqualified from the Super Combined event, which is Slalom and Super G (super giant slalom). She had competed in the Slalom with a visor taped to her helmet to shield her eyes from artificial lights used to illuminate the course, after heavy fog delayed the event. Mel had previously used the visor at a World Cup event without incident.

“That experience was annoying and heartbreaking, but as in life, you take the good with the bad and learn from your mistakes,” she says.

The middle child of a sports mad family, Mel went to Mittagong Public School and Bowral High School. She puts her sporting success down to a happy, unrestricted childhood. “I’ve got two brothers – one older, one younger – and growing up, sport was the answer to everything. I was diagnosed as being blind at three months but in a rural area, occupational therapy was not really a thing 30 years ago.

“Instead, my parents Ronnie and Denise never limited me

“It’s a massive relationship I have with my guides because I trust them with my life, and they trust me with theirs.”

to anything. My mother has told me that when I was little, she would have to bite her tongue all the time to stop herself from stopping me doing things, and instead let me figure it out. I think she knew instinctively that corralling my curiosity and need for adventure would eventually harm the person that I was going to become.”

When Mel was four, Denise enrolled her at Mittagong Gymnastics Club. “Because of my vision, I was incredibly clumsy and I ran into everything. I also had very poor balance so gymnastics was fantastic for me.

“I learnt about balance and it gave me physical awareness although my version of running was always 40 metres down a vault strip. I am built for power not endurance. My mum gave her long legs to my brothers and not to me.”

A chance encounter in secondary school changed her life.

“It was by accident I got into skiing. A coach from an opposing gymnastic club worked for a disabled sporting organisation in Campbelltown. She was running a ski camp for kids and had a spare spot so she called my mum, and said, ‘Does Mel want to go?’ I was 13 and a week off school sounded like a good idea.”

The camp, run by Disabled Wintersport Australia in Thredbo, opened up a world of possibility. “I had never seen snow, never skied before, but the camp was for recreational first timers with disabilities and I fell in love,” says Mel.

“I loved the complete freedom; it’s a way to experience something that no-one with a visual impairment would usually have access to.

“I can never drive obviously, and riding a bike is not a thing, although I have learnt. But skiing is just exhilarating. It’s like the biggest adrenaline rush on the face of the planet.

“The first half of my career was racing Downhill and Super G at insane speeds but when I hit about 26, I realised that I was mortal so my focus shifted to the more technical events that I do



Less than four months after his accident, Sam was strapped into a sit-ski for the first time, “My doctor wasn’t too happy, but I loved it.”

SAM TAIT IN THE PARA-ALPINE COMBINED AT THE PYEONGCHANG 2018 PARALYMPIC GAMES (PHOTOGRAPH PARALYMPICS AUSTRALIA).

today, Slalom and Giant Slalom. But I am an adrenaline junkie and there is no bigger high than skiing.”

Mel credits her parents as her greatest supporters. The couple were in PyeongChang in 2018 to see their daughter claim her two bronze medals thanks to her second guide, Christian Geiger, who surprised them with air tickets to the games. It was the first time Ronnie and Denise had ever seen Mel ski.

“I think they found the experience confronting, but they were incredibly proud,” Mel says. “They had seen me ski on video but never live. I’m glad they got to experience it at my most successful event, after years of hard work and sacrifice, and not just on my part, everyone’s. My family, my coaches, my teammates – everyone pulled together to get those medals because even in an individual sport, you don’t ever get them on your own.”

In the off-season, when she is not seeing physio clients or reading – “I am a massive fantasy geek; if a book has dragons, elves or fairies in it, I am there” – you’ll find Mel working with Blind Sports NSW to cultivate a winter program in Australia, or at the gym. “I do a lot of cross training, and I run and do jiu jitsu.”

But for now, her focus is all Beijing 2022. “Australia has always had a really strong showing in the Paralympic Winter Games with greats like Ron Finneran, Michael Milton, Toby Kane and Cameron Rahles-Rahbula.

“These athletes and others have been the best on the world stage on multiple occasions, and our Beijing team is incredibly strong especially with snowboarders Simon Patmore, Ben Tudhope and Sean Pollard highly ranked. We have always punched above our weight and personally, I’m hoping for podium places. That’s what I’m shooting for.”

## Sam Tait

**E**VERY DAY I THINK ABOUT IT. At the Para Alpine World Championships in 2019, I knew I was having a brilliant run in the Super G [super giant slalom]. Through the headset, my coach told me I was half a second ahead. Stupidly, with two turns to go, I allowed myself to relax a bit, believing I had a gold medal in the bag. Then I crashed.” Even now Sam Tait looks mortified. “I will never, ever relax in a race again. That experience drives me.”

We are sitting in the lounge of Corroboree Ski Lodge in Perisher, both of us Highlands locals who head higher each winter, captivated by the Snowy Mountains and a love of sliding on the white stuff. It’s early June, the day before the official start of the ski season, and already some lifts are cranking, taking advantage of a rare, early winter big snowfall.

Sam had greeted me at the door with a big smile and a strong handshake. Impressively, he bumped down half a dozen stairs in his wheelchair and made me a coffee as good as any in the Snowies.

In 1993, two-year-old Sam, his twin brother James, baby sister Dominique and parents Bob and Anna, moved to Bowral. Sam and James went to school at Chevalier College. “I enjoyed my sport but was not as competitive as my brother,” says Sam, who played first grade soccer. Ski trips overseas cemented the family’s love of skiing.

Late in the summer of 2013, when Sam was 22, big changes were afoot. Bob and Anna, weary of the Sydney commute, although with no hospitality experience, bought Corroboree Ski Lodge. The week they signed the contract, Sam bought a



SAM ASCENDED MOUNT KOSCIUSZKO LAST YEAR USING A CROSS COUNTRY SIT-SKI (TOP) AND A HAND CYCLE AT THE START (PHOTOGRAPHS BOEN FERGUSON). A FILM OF HIS ASCENT, *ALL THE WAY UP*, WILL BE RELEASED IN AUGUST.

motorbike. “I remember telling him to be careful,” says Anna, “and that, with the move, we couldn’t look after him if he broke a bone or two.”

Sam says: “The first thing I remember was waking up in a helicopter and seeing the Harbour Bridge.” He had gone for a motorbike ride with some friends – down from the Highlands to Berry, up the coast to the Royal National Park. Late afternoon, near Scarborough, the accident occurred. “When my girlfriend rang my twin brother to tell him, he told her he knew something had happened. James had felt acute pains in his stomach, near the time I had my accident.”

The helicopter took Sam to Sydney’s Royal North Shore Hospital where he lay for two weeks, his family gathered around him. All had to process the fact Sam had severed his spine at T10, leaving him with no feeling below his hips.

In my teens I fractured my spine in a big fall from a bridge. I recovered. Six months later someone else had exactly the same fall. He became a quadriplegic. I have never forgotten how life is just a series of close margins.

In that first fortnight, Sam received a visit from a wheelchair basketballer. She told him all about the life she had led since her own accident. How sport had given her so much, allowed her to travel widely. For a young man, devastated by his accident, the visit gave him hope.

Sam has always been a “glass half full person” say Bob and Anna, who join us, dropping into some comfy chairs, taking a break from preparing for the season ahead.

“After those first weeks at RNS, Sam was moved to Prince of Wales Hospital,” says Anna. “The staff there were lovely too but, in comparison to RNS, it looked a bit run down. Sam was put in a room with a couple of old men. On the drive home to Bowral, Bob and I were lost in our own thoughts and emotions and, like

any mother, I was upset for my son, for his future. Then my phone beeped, an SMS from Sam, ‘I’ve got this, Mum.’

“Those four words lifted me completely. They are the mark of the man, of my son.”

Back home, the Highlands community rallied around the family. “Everyone was amazing,” said Bob. “Meals were delivered, fundraisers held. The tennis club, Chevalier, Oxley, Frensham and so many others.”

While Sam was at Prince of Wales, he was visited by Stuart Hume, who had also become a paraplegic after a motorbike accident. Stuart came to teach Sam how to drive. “Stuart told me he was a sit-skier and that I should try it. There and then I decided to do it as soon as I could.”

By August, less than four months after his accident, Sam was strapped into a sit-ski for the first time, tentatively skiing the Thredbo slopes. “My doctor wasn’t too happy, but I loved it,” he says.

“I’m now a much better skier than I was before my accident. I had never raced before but now I want to race, want to win. But not for me. For my family, for my coaches, for everyone who has supported me.”

“I get out on the sit-ski in the morning, come in to run the bar for lunch, and hopefully get to ski in the afternoon.”

Sam has raced around the world since and made his way into the Australian team. In 2018 he competed at the Winter Paralympics in PyeongChang, South Korea and, at the 2019 World Championships in Italy, came sixth in the Downhill discipline. The Beijing Winter Paralympics next February is the big goal now. Sam hopes to compete in the Downhill, a straight out race down the mountain, and the Super G, where a few slalom gates are added into the mix.

The pandemic has played havoc with Sam’s racing and training, as it has for high level athletes worldwide. For the first time in years, Sam stayed in the Highlands throughout last summer. “I actually enjoyed the time catching up with friends and training hard five or six days a week. But I’m ready to ski now, ready for the winter here in Perisher.”

Although Bob and Anna could never have known it at the time, their purchase of the ski lodge has given Sam a very handy base for the Australian winter. But there’s no free ride for Sam. He manages the bar at the lodge. “I get out on the sit-ski in the morning, come in to run the bar for lunch, and hopefully get to ski in the afternoon. Then I’m back at the bar all night, sometimes into the early morning. Luckily I don’t need much sleep.”

I first met Sam at the end of last winter, after he had completed an unassisted ascent of Mount Kosciuszko. It was a huge, 12-hour day, culminating in Sam ascending the final summit slopes from Rawson Pass. His team went ahead to set up ropes and, for more than two hours, hand over hand, Sam hauled himself up on his sit-ski. “Everything screamed pain: my biceps, my forearms, my hands. I was determined to see the golden sunset from the roof of Australia.”

Determination is certainly the word for this amazing man. Fingers crossed this determination might see another golden moment in Beijing. **HL**

To help Sam get to the Winter Paralympics visit his Australian Sports Foundation page [asf.org.au/athletes/sam-tait](http://asf.org.au/athletes/sam-tait)

*All the Way Up*, a film of Sam’s ascent of Kosciuszko, will be released in August.