

To the other diners in this busy South Melbourne café, Jack Swift is an athlete on his way to training. They wouldn't have a clue he's strolling around on a prosthetic leg.

That's because the 25-year-old Paralympian has achieved his goal of being able to live life exactly as he did before a 14-tonne excavator crushed his right leg on a building site in 2006.

"I certainly don't feel limited or disabled now," Swift says. "I do everything I did before the accident, if not more."

"More" is putting it mildly.

In just under a month, the East Ivanhoe resident will represent Australia in three athletics events at the London Paralympics. He has half a semester left before he graduates from Deakin University with a bachelor of exercise science. In 2011, he was a finalist in *Cleo's* bachelor of the year competition. To top it off, he has just put a deposit on his first house.

"I had the option of going back to labouring after my accident, but I said to myself, 'life's short, I'm only going to do things that I'm passionate about and enjoy.'"

For Swift, that meant sport, which he believes was a big part of his recovery.

"Mentally, exercise did so much for me while I was in rehab. I wasn't working, I wasn't doing anything else, it felt like fitness was something I could achieve."

Swift says it only took a split second for the excavator to run over his leg on the building site where he had taken a job as a plumber's labourer straight out of high school.

He's just thankful that doctors at the Royal Melbourne Hospital were able to save his knee joint. When asked whether his positive outlook stayed with him throughout the recovery process, Swift admits the first few months were hard. "I didn't know anybody in my family or group of friends who had a disability. I was 21, and I felt like my life was over."

It was after a visit in hospital from veteran Paralympian Don Elgin that Swift first started thinking about athletics.

"Don pretty much said to me, 'you're really not going to be limited at all with what you can and can't do.'"

Elgin introduced Swift to his best friend and former coach Tim Matthews, a fellow Paralympian, and it wasn't long before Matthews saw potential in Swift as a professional athlete.

There were setbacks and surgeries along the way, but Swift's times continued to improve leading up to the 2010 National Championships in Perth.

"Tim spoke to me and said 'if you really knuckle down here and get some consistency happening, you'll get that qualifying time'. I did that, and I suppose once you see progress, whatever your goal is, you just keep going."

Swift says that while progress is what keeps him motivated, it's also been a lot of hard work over the years. "It took at least a year before I could keep up a normal walking pace on my prosthetic leg. Some days, it doesn't even feel like I'm missing a leg. Others, I wake up and it feels like I'm walking on shards of glass."

Despite occasional bouts of phantom pain, Swift trains at the Victorian Institute of Sport's Lakeside Stadium in Albert Park seven days a week, sometimes twice a day. The level of intensity means he's usually close to throwing up by the end of each session.

"At the end of the day, though, I'm doing all this to compete," he says. "When it's a cold, wet training session in Melbourne, you just have to remind yourself of that last race in September at the Paralympics. I want a medal."

As a single-leg amputee, his main obstacle is achieving balance, but Swift says it's a different story for South African rival Oscar Pistorius.

A double-leg amputee, Pistorius made international headlines when he qualified for the 400-metre individual and 4x400m relay events at the 2012 Olympic Games. Nicknamed "The Blade Runner" because of

COVER STORY

\ Sport has created a new life for this Paralympian, writes JO DAVY.

MAN ON A MISSION

LONDON-BOUND LOCAL HEROES

TABLE TENNIS
Melissa Tapper \ South Melbourne

TRACK & FIELD
Katy Parrish \ St Kilda

WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL
Cobi Crispin \ Hawthorn
Amanda Carter \ Heidelberg



On track:
Paralympian Jack Swift training at the Victorian Institute of Sport. (DARRIAN TRAYNOR)

his carbon prosthetic blades, Pistorius will become the first amputee to compete in the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

"The double-leg amputees are getting much more efficient with their times," says Swift. "And as technology evolves, they're only going to get quicker."

As for his chances of winning gold against Pistorius, Swift is trying to stay realistic.

"I'm running against a guy with an A-qualifying time in the Olympics in my main event," he says, shrugging. "As long as I'm getting quicker, I'll be happy with that."

Looking beyond the closing ceremony in September seems a long way off at this stage, but Swift has plans to head back to Europe to travel with mates. After that, he's thinking about being a physical education teacher.

"I don't see myself finishing up in London and sitting on the couch for the rest of my life," he says. "I am looking forward to a beer, though." \

jdavy@theweeklyreview.com.au

WE WELCOME YOUR FEEDBACK @
www.theweeklyreview.com.au/cover-story