Charlie swaps dance shoes for swimmers in race for Special Olympics success

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For National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participant Charlie Wilkins, globetrotting his way towards a third Special Olympics has the 23-year-old “living his best life” this year.

Having just returned from a theatre performance tour of the United Kingdom, Charlie, who lives with Down syndrome, is ready to swap his dancing shoes for swimmers and hit the blocks at the Special Olympics National Games.

Despite clocking up the kilometres, Charlie’s mother Angela said her son would be primed and ready to race when the games got underway in Launceston, Tasmania on October 17.

“When he received a letter in the mail to say he’d been selected to represent Team South Australia, his eyes lit up. He’s very excited,” Angela said.

“He just loves being a part of the team with his friends. They train together and it’s fun for him to travel and represent his state.

“Charlie is an old hand now, so he’ll also be able to mentor some of the newer athletes on the big stage.”

First representing South Australia at the age of 12, Charlie’s achievements not only include what will be a third Special Olympics, but a resume boasting success on the international stage.

Representing Australia 3 years ago, Charlie brought home medals from the Special Olympics World Games in Abu Dhabi.

“It feels really good, feel happy and joy,” Charlie said of representing Australia.

“I laugh, I never see my mum crying like that before.”

More recently, after setting personal bests (PBs) in 6 out of his 7 events at State Championships earlier this year, Charlie is raring to go for the Special Olympics National Games.

With a full schedule, Charlie will be swimming in the 50m breaststroke, 100m breaststroke, 50m freestyle, and the men’s 4x50m freestyle relay, and can expect plenty of cheers from his proud family who’ll be watching on.

“It’ll be a great event for Charlie, and he’s just so excited and looking forward to travelling and staying with all the other athletes,” Angela said.

For Charlie, whether he’s stealing the show on stage in England or readying to race in the Apple Isle, balancing theatre pursuits with swimming allows him to enjoy the best of both worlds.

When not dancing professionally with the award-winning and inclusive, Restless Dance Theatre, Charlie hits the pool to train 4 times a week with Onkaparinga Swimming Club.

Angela said Charlie's pursuits combine perfectly, and through using his NDIS supports to access support workers and speech therapy to build his confidence and communication, thriving in both the theatre and pool was all in a day's work.

"That's the beauty with Restless Dance, the fitness and exercise helps with his core strength and flexibility, and the swimming helps with his dancing. They complement each other," she said.

"Charlie's support workers get him to training, competitions and his dance, and he's able to travel to other side of the world to dance or take part in Special Olympics competitions.

"When he comes back from these trips, whether it's a competition interstate or a dance trip overseas, he has a sense of independence and the motivation to take the next steps in living the life a 23-year-old wants to live.

"It's all made possible through the NDIS."

For now, that life will see Charlie race back to South Australia following the National Games to perform in the Adelaide season of collaborative dance production, Rewards for the Tribe.

After barely catching his breath, Charlie will jet off to Brisbane in early November, where he'll swim for Australia in the Virtus Oceania Asia Games.

The international, multi-sport competition for elite athletes with an intellectual disability, will see Charlie don the green and gold in 5 events against other athletes with Down syndrome from Australia, Asia, the Pacific, and New Zealand.

Charlie hopes swimmers with Down syndrome will have the chance to represent Australia in a future Paralympics.

And while his eye is always on the podium at National Games, it's not the main focus.

"A few years ago, we stopped focusing on medals and now Charlie focusses on PBs. So, if he happens to get a medal at same time, that's a bonus," Angela said.

"It is wonderful that Charlie has had the opportunity to have these experiences. And we are so proud of him for rising to the challenges and making the most of them."

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