

Fearnley hits the pits in his new life as an able seaman

- by: *DD McNicoll*
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Inspirational athlete Kurt Fearnley 'finds himself in a strange place' as part of Investec Loyal's crew for the Sydney to Hobart classic *Source: Supplied*

FOR two months, champion wheelchair athlete Kurt Fearnley has spent every spare minute in his crowded life getting on boats -- what kind of boat hasn't mattered.

If it floated, Fearnley was happy to be aboard.

His main focus was yachts, Sydney-Hobart line honours contender Investec Loyal being the favourite, but it has included everything from mates' runabouts to offshore fishing charter boats.

The aim was simple: to become as familiar with the problems he might face at sea as those he has spent his life overcoming on land.

His dedication will pay off on Boxing Day when he joins the other 23 crew members on Investec Loyal for the 628-nautical mile slogfest from Sydney to the welcoming and sheltered waters of the Derwent River in Hobart.

"I've found myself in some strange places in my life and this is just one of them," the 30-year-old, who has represented Australia at both the Olympics and Paralympics, and successfully crawled the Kokoda Track, said yesterday.

Born without a section of his lower spine, Fearnley has never allowed his physical condition to curb his lust for sport and adventure.

Not able to take his wheelchair aboard Investec Loyal, he has to crawl everywhere -- something that has proved to be a surprising advantage.

"I'm as able as it is possible to get," he said.

"I can't fall over and I'm as fast on my hands and knees as any of the other crew members.

"It is my first dabble into competitive sailing but it is one that I am really looking forward to."

Fearnley started his new love affair with sailing after his athletics season finished two months ago and after he found himself sitting next to former Wallabies captain Phil Kearns at a charity dinner.

"I've been involved with charities such as Don't DIS my ABILITY for years and Phil has his Humpty Dumpty charity," Fearnley said.

"He started talking to me about the Hobart race and the way the yacht he was sailing on raised money for the Loyal Foundation.

"He said that last year they raised more than \$700,000 and he introduced me to the yacht's owner, Anthony Bell.

"I said to Bell that I'd love to give sailing a try and he said if I wanted to give it a go and could handle the work, I was in.

"Everyone was a bit nervous the first time I went out, but I proved I was as able as it was possible to get."

Aboard Investec Loyal, Fearnley is located in "the pit" in the middle of the boat where he works the electric winches and keeps the multitude of sheets and halyards (ropes) under control. His relatively small stature and great upper-body strength make him ideal for the position.

"I also manage to keep out of everyone else's way," he laughed.

So far in his limited sailing career he has only been seasick once and he says it is not something he is afraid of during the usually rough trip across Bass Strait. Fearnley will be joined aboard Investec Loyal by Kearns, another former Wallaby Phil Waugh and boxer Danny Green.