



Australian Government
Australian Sports Commission

ACE

ATHLETE CAREER AND EDUCATION
ENHANCING YOUR SPORTING LIFE



DANIEL KOWALSKI – OAM

I come from the proud sport of swimming. I initially got involved in the sport from following my sister Shevaun to the pool as a way of meeting people. We had just moved to Australia from overseas so it really was a social thing. I was not a great age-group swimmer, but I just loved it. I loved the feeling of swimming and the friends I made from it, and I was always inspired by the history and tradition of the sport in this country. Just being a member of the national team and being part of that history is a memorable achievement, as was medalling at two Olympics.

To Melbourne and back

I left home at 17, moving from the Gold Coast to Melbourne for my swimming. It was really hard as my family was not keen to see me move away, but I knew that it was the right thing to do. After four years with my coach in Melbourne I had to move to Canberra to the Australian Institute of Sport to find a new coach, which was tough.

Aside from moving coaches and towns I also experienced a lot of transitional changes through injury. I had chronic shoulder problems and ended up having four surgeries.

Over the course of my swimming career I also had major self-confidence issues, brought on by my success and also through an eating disorder. It was really hard for me, because I knew I had problems but was too scared to do anything about it – this was a weakness and athletes are not meant to show weakness. Once I acknowledged the fact that I needed help I sought it, and it definitely helped me become a more rounded person. This process really helped me see things differently when it came to my results in the pool as well.

After 18 months it was time to go back home to the Gold Coast to my original coach, and to be closer to family and friends. Once back in Queensland I also realised that my career was winding down and I really needed to look to the future, so I started my degree.

Daniel Kowalski is an adviser for the Athlete Career and Education (ACE) program. As a successful Olympic swimmer, he was also an Australian elite athlete who could have taken advantage of the ACE program but did not, and now realises the missed opportunity.

Daniel experienced some hardships during his sporting career, from an eating disorder and chronic injuries to the feeling of being too many years behind in education and work experience. He is now keen to assist new athletes to make the most of their sporting life through integrating learning, work and sports performance.

This is his story.



‘While in the midst of my career I didn’t understand the importance of balance. I wish I had, because I truly believe it would have made me a better athlete. I thought all I needed to do was swim – nothing could have been further from the truth. Hindsight is a wonderful thing.’

Back to school

I didn’t want to be that person – the one not able to let go when it was time. Surgery was a wake-up call to get back to university and finish my degree. I contacted the university I had previously been attending and was lucky to be reinstated.

I needed support and I used it. The people providing this support for me were people from all facets of life whom I respected. Now I wish I had gone back to university five or six years earlier, as that is how far behind I feel I am compared to other people my age in terms of work experience.

Didn’t think ACE was for me

I did not utilise ACE the way it should be. I didn’t feel I needed to, nor did I want to use ACE for most of its services. I did a few short workshops on cooking and media training (which really did help), but I just didn’t think ACE was useful. Man, was I wrong!

My best advice to athletes considering their career is, don’t be scared. That was my downfall. I was one of those athletes who was so used to excelling at the most important thing in my life (at the time) that I was too scared to even consider going to uni or getting some form of tertiary education. Fear of failure – I didn’t want to not do well.

Working as an ACE adviser

I didn’t see the importance of career and education post-sport until late in my career, which is one of my biggest regrets.

I worked in different roles, predominantly marketing-type roles, and while I enjoyed them I did not find them as satisfying or fulfilling as I find working as an adviser for the ACE program.