

London calling...

Alex Bernard interviews Olympic open water swimmer Melissa Gorman

Ocean swimming is an incredibly tough sport and it's still new at the Olympic Games. It will be on the program for only the second time in London and one of the hot medal contenders in the the 10-kilometre open water event will be Boondall's Melissa Gorman. Gorman, 26, has been training with veteran star-maker Ken Wood at Redcliffe for 11 years, specialising in the 800-metre and 1500-metre freestyle and the five and 10-kilometre open water swims. Wood has a keen eye for talent having trained champions such as Leisel Jones, Jessicah Schipper and Geoff Huegill. Gorman goes into her second Olympic Games as the only Australian woman to qualify for the 10-kilometre open water swim, after finishing fourth in the event at last year's World Championships. "There's really nothing in it once you're in the top 10 because it's like the Melbourne Cup, anything can happen once you're in that water," says Gorman. And if you think it's a non-contact sport, think again. Gorman has had her goggles

ripped off, been elbowed in the face, scratched and bruised, and several competitors have emerged from the water with black eyes and even a broken rib. "In the Olympics there will be 25 girls all diving off the pontoon together. It's a free for all! That first kilometre is brutal. In other events there can be up to 60 girls; there are a few of them you know not to line up next to, it can get really rough," says Gorman. "But it's also a great sport. I was competing in San Francisco once and a really large seal was swimming along beside us, it was amazing." It was Gorman's mum Kerrie who put her in Nippers at Caloundra at age 7, along with younger brother Tim, to give them open water confidence. "I was terrified of the surf when I was young and I didn't want my kids to have that fear, so we got involved with Surf Life Saving and Melissa never looked back," says Kerrie today. "When she was around 15 she moved over to the pool to train with Ken, but Melissa was always

the plodder. She was happy coming third or second and she has got there through sheer hard work. She taught herself to win and she will come home with that gold medal." Gorman recently completed her Bachelor of Behavioural Science (Psychology) at QUT and lives at home with mum Kerrie and Kerrie's partner Wayne, helping out as much as she can when she's not training with her eight foster siblings who range in age from two to 18 and three have severe disabilities. "It puts things in perspective. I have a whole other life when I get home, watching my 16-year-old brother Joshua trying to walk again (due to his disability) keeps me grounded," says Gorman. Her close friend Lauren Arndt, 27, trained in the same squad for five years and swam in open water events. Now a personal trainer on the Gold Coast, Arndt hung up her competitive swimming togs two years ago. "Luckily for me, Mel came after my time in open water," laughs Arndt. "She's a world-beater. She's very tough mentally, which



makes her a very good competitor, but she's friends with everyone too. She'll talk to everyone on the beach, have a laugh, but when she lines up to race, look out, because she is a fierce competitor," says Arndt. She says Gorman is the perfect ambassador for the relatively new sport. "She's just coming into her prime. Mel will [win a] medal in London, I reckon the gold, and even though there are a lot of younger open water swimmers coming through she's untouchable in Australia right now. She's a great role model because she's forging the way for them," says Arndt. The Queensland Olympic Committee will host a farewell lunch for our Olympians on 25 May, 12-4pm at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre. Tickets from \$200 per ticket to \$3000 per table with an Olympian as a table guest. See www.olympics.com.au/qld for details.



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