



Going for GOLD

A talented Aldridge swimmer could be one to watch at next year's London Paralympics. Amy Walters went to meet her

At the age of just 14, Tully Kearney has her sights firmly set on success. As one of the country's most promising swimming talents, the Aldridge youngster is hoping that 2012 may be the year she gets her shot at the big time. She already has a vast haul of medals to her name at all levels, and has recently been upgraded to World Class. But Tully's prowess in the pool is all the more impressive when you realise the obstacle she has to overcome. Tully suffers from spastic diplegia, a type of cerebral palsy. The condition causes the muscles in her legs to be very tight, meaning her legs can be stiff and painful. It also causes balance and co-ordination difficulties, as well as misalignment of the bone structure around the areas of tightened musculature. Tully comes from a family of swimmers so it's no surprise she's a natural in the water, despite her disability. Mum Amanda broke her first county record at the age of 13 before moving to Australia at 16 to train, while 17-year-old brother Luke is also a competitive swimmer. "I first joined a swimming club because I used to go and watch my brother swim most nights and a coach approached me about joining in instead of just sitting poolside," says Tully. Tully's potential was evident, even at a young age. By the time she reached nine, she started her training properly and was soon swimming competitively. Disability swimmers are classified according to their disabilities in order to ensure everyone is competing on a level playing field. Tully slots into the S10 classification for competitors who have minimal weakness affecting the legs, including restrictions in hip joint movement; swimmers with both feet deformed; swimmers with one leg amputated below the knee; or swimmers missing one hand. This year the Aldridge School pupil has progressed dramatically. Tully is now ranked ninth in the world in her classification for her signature event – the 400m freestyle – by the International Paralympics Committee. Most evenings Tully can be found training with Boldmere Swimming Club either at their main base

at Wyndley Leisure Centre or over at Castle Vale. Ashley Cox is the head coach at Boldmere Swimming Club and has been looking after Tully's progress for the past two years. He says: "The first time I saw Tully was when she came to a lower level squad at Boldmere. She was pushing off the wall, not streamlined very well and a bit sloppy, but you could see she was strong and the squad was too easy for her. We soon moved her into the top squad we have here. "Tully had been at a different club doing quite a bit of swimming, and when she came to Boldmere a couple of years ago we really centred her training around stroke and technique, as well as feedback. She thrives on feedback, more than most, and arguably that's one of the key things that has helped her improve. We did less swimming for a time at the start and then built our way back up again. "Tully fits into the programme well, and she can even hold her own in some of the exercises against the senior men." And Tully agrees that moving to Boldmere has been a key element in her rapid progression. "Ash is the best coach I've had so far," she says. "At my old club it was just swimming up and down; there was no looking at your stroke and correcting you. Here if you're doing something wrong they'll stop you straight away and explain what's going wrong. Since I joined Boldmere everything has progressed – my stroke, diving, underwater swimming and techniques have all improved." Mum Amanda, a speech and language therapist, is there to support Tully every step of the way. "I'm really proud of her; she never ceases to amaze me with the amount she's achieved," says Amanda. "I never thought she'd be able to swim competitively – I really only wanted to get her into the water so she could save herself if she ever got into trouble! "I'd been quite overprotective and at her previous club they wanted her to train more but I always told them she wasn't ready for that. Having been a swimmer myself, I didn't know if I wanted that sort »



Above: Tully with Boldmere Swimming Club head coach Ashley Cox. Right: Tully on the starting block, ready to race at Pond's Forge in Sheffield.



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