

# DALE ELLIOTT

Comedian, Inspirational Speaker,  
Paraplegic, Skydiver

Jumping photos by Curtis Morton



It's strange the thoughts that run through your mind when something so severe happens to you. For me, I didn't think about myself. I can't remember for a second thinking about how this spinal cord injury was going to affect my life. I think that it was because I couldn't comprehend the insurmountable challenges I was going to face. I had never felt such a feeling of 'now' being that I could not think ahead. Not even 1 minute ahead. For me, that was very strange. I had my life planned out to the finest detail and now I couldn't even compute any realistic detail at all. My mind had gone into a deep shock. Then I heard the ambulance coming. My life as a paraplegic had begun.

'Door!' Someone yelled out from the front of the XL. The cold air came rushing in to meet my face with the uniqueness that 14,000ft air has. Even after 8 years I remembered it. It was October 24th, 2008 and AFF instructors, Al Gray and Jason Ellul, were about to make Australian skydiving history. By jumping with me they were joining a special club. I call it the 'Paraplegic AFF' or 'PAFF'. Freefalling with a student who can't feel or move their legs or torso and can't arch at all is an interesting exercise. One that many instructors would rather not do and rightly so, it's really pushing the boundaries of an otherwise safe and well regulated sport. Are the risks worth it?

I jumped 37 times as an able bodied skydiver during 2000-2002 while I was a C206 pilot at Strathalbyn and Goolwa Drop Zones in South Australia. I flew over 1,000 loads in that time and had great fun doing big wingovers and beat ups after the last load. One day I did 17 loads to 10,000ft and remember wishing that skydivers should be banned from eating kababs with garlic sauce and drinking Coopers Pale on Friday nights. Sometimes you can't get that window open fast enough! I wonder if that's why the pilot gets given a rig too?

Now I am the first PAFF student to be issued my 'A' Licence in Australia and I'm the second licenced paraplegic in the world after the legendary Peter Hewitt in South Africa. Peter has been a fantastic mentor and has really helped me achieve this. Thank you Pete.

Me being the first PAFF student in Australia brought with it many new challenges for my PAFF instructor Curtis Morton at SA Skydiving. I did my first 2 jumps at Lower Light DZ in SA out of the XL aircraft from Nagambie when it came over for a few days.

*'I reached down to feel my legs and oh shit... they were numb, bloody motorbikes...'*



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I then went to Langhorne Creek DZ, the home of Greg 'Miff' Smith as it was easier to get in and out of a 206 compared to a 182. I have exactly the same issues to address as an able bodied AFF student. I had been one before and I remember what I had issues with. I just needed to think about some new ways of dealing with freefall stability with no leg input. To combat this I made some carbon fibre leg braces to keep my legs at 90 degrees in free fall. I think that skydiving is a mental discipline more than a physical one. Gravity is going to work in the same direction no matter who you are and it does not care if your legs don't work. You need to use your head to master this freefall thing. You need to work with what you have.

It has been an interesting exercise working out how to get stable and stay stable in freefall. It was easy to get caught up in lots of technical discussions about stability, aerodynamics and centre of gravity during briefings and in the end Curtis and I decided on one thing that we wanted to get out of the jump and went and did it.

While my legs are of no benefit in the sky, I have to ensure they are not a liability. I had to address this on two fronts, both in freefall and also during landing. People try to compare me to an amputee skydiver, which there are hundreds of around the world, but this is just not possible. If you don't have a limb, then it's not there to help and it's also not there to hinder. Also arching is still possible and injury sensation is there too.

We have all seen tandem passengers lifting their legs upon landing and that is what I needed to do. I couldn't flare the canopy and lift my legs at the same time so I modified some motor x pants and fitted 2 straps that run around my knees with a large carabineer on each end. I attached these to my chest harness after opening and my legs are lifted up and out of the way. It works very well. As I then need to land on my rear I have inserted an energy-absorbing matrix of foam and a gel pack that stops skin breakdown if I'm in my jumpsuit all day. If I break any bones in my legs it would be very serious. I can not feel any pain so I would know if I injure myself which can lead to infection in under 3 days. This could kill me or cause me to become very sick. The healing process also takes a long time with any damage on my legs. It is because the blood circulation in my legs is poor due to inactivity. Landing safely is therefore the



most important single factor when I jump and I need to be much more aware of the things that can affect a soft landing. Wind strength, canopy size, landing area and turbulence all need to be addressed carefully and I place my own limitations according to the conditions. I am not going to be able to jump all the time when everyone else is. That's just part of my modified approach to skydiving. No hooking it in either! Bugga!

I think that as long as you have safety as the highest priority, giving something a go and being brave is the next part! I think this forged a unique bond between instructor and student as this role was reversed every now and then. The dream of me diving out into the sky by myself and being free of everything was the motivation for me. I'm so glad that others have supported me through this re-familiarisation. It has been such an awesome experience. (A huge thank you goes to the following sponsors: Parachutes Australia, Deepseed, Icarus, Larsen and Brusgaard and Vigil.)



*I'm lucky that I've realised what life can give in return for you giving something a go. I can't walk, big deal! It's overrated, I just fly instead!*



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