

= Priya Cooper =

Priya Naree Cooper , OAM ( born 2 October 1974 ) is an Australian world champion disabled swimmer , winning nine Paralympic gold medals as well as world records and world championships . She competed in the Australian 1992 , 1996 and 2000 Summer Paralympics swimming team with an S8 classification . She was twice the co @-@ captain of the Australian Paralympic team , including at the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney , and carried the Australian flag at the closing ceremonies for the 1992 and 1996 Summer Paralympics . Cooper has cerebral palsy and spends much of her time in a wheelchair . She attended university , working on a course in health management . After she ended her competitive Paralympic career , she became a commentator , and covered the swimming events at the 2002 Commonwealth Games .

= = Early life = =

Priya Naree Cooper was born on 2 October 1974 in Perth , Western Australia . She was born with cerebral palsy , and spends 75 % of her time in a wheelchair . As a youngster , her mother encouraged her to try out several sports , including tap dancing and ballet .

With her father 's encouragement , Cooper first started swimming in her backyard pool when she was six years old . Her first swimsuit was a bikini . Her father taught her to swim while making her wear big yellow floaties . She started competitive swimming at school carnivals . In the first one she competed in , she finished sixth in the F @-@ division 50 m butterfly . She was informed about disabled athletes by a teacher at school . Her initial reaction to learning about disabled sport was to question if she was " disabled enough " to compete . She made her first national team appearance when she was in year 12 in school , after winning twelve gold medals in national swimming meets . By that time , Cooper had already begun serious training , waking up at 4 a.m. to get pool time .

= = Competitive athletic career = =

Cooper is a world champion disabled swimmer , winning nine Paralympic gold medals as well as world records and world championships . She represented Wheelchair Sports Western Australia at the 1991 National Wheelchair Games , winning nine gold medals . Her home pool was the Swan Park Leisure Centre in Midvale , Western Australia . She had a number of coaches over the course of her competitive career , including Matthew Brown and Frank Ponta .

Cooper made her Paralympic debut at the 1992 Summer Paralympics in Barcelona , at the age of 17 . She was in danger of not going to the 1992 Paralympics because of funding issues for the Australian Paralympic Federation . The Federation made an emergency appeal for funding from the public in order to cover the cost of transporting the Australian team to Barcelona . A variety of small donations allowed Cooper and other Australian athletes to compete . She won three Gold and two Silver medals , and broke two World records and three Paralympic records . She was offered a non @-@ residential Australian Institute of Sport Athletes with a Disability swimming scholarship in 1993 and supported until 2000 .

She was a co @-@ captain of the Australian team at the 1996 Summer Paralympics , where she competed in six individual events and two relay events in the S8 class , winning five gold medals , four individual and one team , and one silver and one bronze medal . She set several world records at the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta in the 200 m medley and the 400 m freestyle swimming events . She also set personal bests in the 100 m backstroke and 100 m freestyle . Her world record time in the 400 m freestyle was 5 : 11 @.@ 47 , her 100 m backstroke time was 1 : 23 @.@ 43 , and her 100 m freestyle time was 1 : 12 @.@ 08 .

In 1998 , Cooper competed at the Paralympic Swimming World Championships in Christchurch , New Zealand . She set a world record in the 400m freestyle at the event . She set another world record in the S8 classification , with an 800m freestyle time of 10 : 40 @.@ 03 , three seconds faster than the previous record . She also won a gold medal in the 200m individual medley , with a finish that was half a second away from beating her own previous world record .

Cooper competed in the Sporting Wheelies and Disabled Association @-@ sponsored 1998 Queensland Championships in five swimming events . She and Brad Thomas were invited to attend as special guest competitors . While attending , Cooper also hosted a coaching clinic with Thomas .

In 1999 , Cooper moved to Sydney , the location of the 2000 Summer Paralympics , to prepare for the games . She had been living there for eighteen months at the time of those games . Her family continued to live in Perth and the move was an adjustment period for her . She helped to make several instructional videos for Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games ( SOCOG ) to help train volunteers for the games . In preparation for the 2000 Paralympics , the Australian Paralympic Committee created a CD to help with fundraising . She participated in this by choosing the song " Ashes " by The Superjesus and singing it onstage during the CD 's launch .

At the 2000 Summer Paralympics , her last games , she was the co @-@ captain of the Australian Paralympic team . Coming into the 2000 Games , there were some concerns that she would not be able to compete because of a shoulder injury . She was worried about how receptive Australians and the world would be in terms of disabled sport prior to the Paralympics being hosted in Australia . She was surprised when the Paralympic Games started at how supportive Australians and international visitors were of athletes at the 2000 Paralympic Games . She won the 400 m freestyle and took three bronze medals in the 100 m freestyle , 4 x 100 m freestyle relay and 4 x 100 m medley relay events . After the Games , Cooper believed that they had a long reaching societal impact in terms of creating a better image for disabled people around the country and helping to increase acceptance of them as part of Australian society . She also believed that the Games would help increase spectatorship for Paralympic sports around the country .

Cooper 's swimming style relied on upper body strength , with her legs trailing behind her . Despite her love of water , Cooper had a fear of swimming in the open water of the ocean . To help overcome this fear , she competed in the 2002 open water 20 kilometres ( 12 mi ) Rottnest Channel Swim in Western Australia .

= = Recognition = =

Cooper was selected to carry the Australian flag at the closing ceremonies for the 1992 and 1996 Summer Paralympics . She was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia in 1993 , was named the 1995 Paralympian of the Year , was the Young Australian of the Year for Sport in 1999 , received an Australian Sports Medal in 2000 , and was inducted into the Western Australian Hall of Champions in 2006 . In 1998 , Cooper won a Dairy Farmers Sporting Chance award in swimming . That year , she also won a Curtin University of Technology John Curtin Medal . In 1999 , she won the APC Merit Award .

Cooper was chosen to officially open the Perth Hockey Stadium at Curtin University in 2009 . She attended the tenth anniversary celebrations for the Sydney Olympic and Paralympic Games held at Sydney Olympic Park in 2010 .

In October 2015 , she became the fourth Paralympian to be inducted into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame .

= = Personal life = =

Cooper studied at Curtin University , where she graduated with a degree in health promotion and media . She was also a public speaker , attending events to talk about disabilities . Cooper had a volunteer position , where she worked as a scriptwriter for a radio station in Perth .

At the age of 27 Cooper became a commentator for the 2002 Commonwealth Games , covering the swimming events . She is a Therapy Focus Ambassador , and a member of the Disabilities and Carer Council . She is actively involved in raising funds for several charities , and was part of the Great Pram Push event held in East Fremantle , Western Australia , a charity event that raised funds for the Starlight Children 's Foundation and the Children 's Leukaemia and Cancer Research Foundation .

Cooper is married to Paralympic swimmer Rodney Bonsack and has two children .

