

Serving up success

A top volleyballer hopes his sport has a spike in popularity. By Alana Schetzer

Proving that passion and endurance are the keys to sporting success is 32-year-old volleyball player Damien Whitburn.

The Heidelberg Volleyball Club member has been playing the game since he was a teenager, and shows no signs of stopping.

In a sporting career spanning more than a decade, Whitburn has travelled the world, won grand finals, been honoured with individual medals and has trained at the Australian Institute of Sport. He is also captain of the Victorian national league state team, the University Blues.

It's a far cry from when he first entered the court in high school. "Me and some friends went along to watch a game; it looked pretty challenging, but a bit of fun, so we joined in and took it from there," Whitburn explains.

Although it may not have the same aggression as other sports, Whitburn says

it takes expertise and strength to be good at volleyball. "You have to be pretty athletic, strong, fast. (Being) tall is good for some of the big jumps. You also need good hand-and-eye co-ordination and good balance."

The game may not be the highest profile sport in Australia, but Whitburn's club is one of the most successful volleyball clubs in the country. Last season, all four Heidelberg Volleyball Club teams finished in the top four of the state league.

The sport's low profile has had a big effect on players and their ability to contest national and international competitions, Whitburn says. "In Australia, you either pay your own way or find sponsors (but) that's very hard, because you've got cricket and football over here, then you've got heaps of other sports as well; it's hard to try and get some cash," he says.

Overseas, it's a different story. In many countries, volleyball is the national sport and its players are afforded the

same salary and prestige as swimmers and football players in Australia. Annual incomes of \$500,000 are not unheard of.

"It has a big following in Asia but in Europe it's pretty massive at the moment," he says. "In Italy, it's the second sport only to soccer and it's the same sort of thing in Russia."

The financial limitations haven't stopped Whitburn or the club's members from taking their game seriously, though.

"We train in Bundoora about three days a week on court and we have a weight program for fitness, plus we play on Saturdays during the season."

As for the new season, the club is hoping to avenge last year's semi-final loss. Whitburn says the club is determined to add another premiership to its trophy case.

"We've got a couple of exciting recruits, a new coach, so hopefully we'll make the finals."



STEVE LIGHTFOOT