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*A spirited
effort*

to find a cure for
Spinal Cord Injury



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Gin distillery a tonic for Spinal Cord Injury

An accident while snowboarding in the French Alps left Dean Martellozzo a paraplegic. After rehab he went back to university, completed his MBA, joined a US financial services firm and while out with three mates hit on the idea to set up a distillery.

Dean Martellozzo



and awareness because my goals certainly align with SpinalCure," he said.

"For me, it was the fact that it is out there working towards the cure. While I know that sounds obvious, it is the key motivator for me. I live with the dream of being able to return to life the way it was before the day my luck turned against me in 2011.

"I know that it's far more complex than that, but I am attracted to the fact that they are trying to find the 'cure' to the injury and not just make it easier to live life now that I've had one. Both are incredibly important, but I'm the eternal optimist that will always go for the glory."

As well as a diverse set of products, Headlands has a diverse workforce as well.

This year Martellozzo was made an inaugural SpinalCure Community Ambassador with two big fundraising events held, including the inaugural Dubbo Race Day and the Everest Fashion Carnival supported by the ATC Foundation.

"We are fortunate to have relationships with groups like these. While the link between the risk of spinal cord injury and horse racing are clear, we are always on the lookout for opportunities to explore new avenues to raise funds and spread the awareness of our cause," he said. "If you know of anybody that wants to help, tell them to get in touch! Every conversation is valuable because it provides us an entry into a new network.

In 2015 his night out with childhood friends came to fruition. The Headlands Distilling Company in Wollongong on the NSW South Coast was launched with a charitable mindset, agreeing to donate 20 per cent of its profits to SpinalCure.

"Jared Smith is a chemical engineer and had the production capability, Lachlan Hingley brought in his medical and health science experience and Thomas Simnadis had a lot of contact with grain farmers through his PhD which was very helpful as grain is a key ingredient for making alcohol," Martellozzo said.

From small things little things grow and the products are now sold online, in bottle shops, bars and restaurants. They are receiving international awards for their uniquely Australian products, including medals at the London and San Francisco world spirits competitions.

"To the best of our knowledge, our Boobialla gin is the only gin in the world made exclusively with native Australian juniper and our Tidal Lines gin is crafted from a local indigenous fruit called the Illawarra plum. We are also working on whisky finished in authentic sherry casks from Spain and have three different varieties with a first release scheduled for Christmas."

The decision to take SpinalCure aboard came about when his friend Xander Beccari cycled from Brisbane to Wollongong to raise money for people with spinal cord injury.

"Xander did a lot of research because he wanted the money donated to have the highest possible impact. After he told me about SpinalCure, I looked at how the charity operates, what they do and more importantly, how they do it. The more I learned, the more I wanted to get involved and help raise money

There are so many people out there that support what we do, we just need to make the connection."

Covid puts a hold on business

According to Martellozzo, Covid was a horrifying time "when everyone was trying to work out what was going on". People in healthcare, education, the police and local businesses were concerned when their access to hand sanitiser ran dry and another idea was born. "We stopped making drinking alcohol for a few months and concentrated purely on making sanitiser. It was frightening to be one of the only sources of sanitiser in Wollongong, but we had the capacity to make it and at the time it was seen as the thing that would save us. We felt we had the responsibility to put everything into it and make it available to the community. We still produce Barleysan as a lot of our customers prefer it to imported products on the market."

As well as a diverse set of products, Headlands has a diverse workforce as well. Zac, one of their fulltime staff members is neurodivergent – which in his words is the preferred umbrella term for those whose brains are wired differently. In his case, he has ADHD/ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder).

"I'm the production manager for the company" Zac said. "I oversee the fulfilment of orders placed and manage the process after we have made the product. Bottling, labelling, corking, wax dipping and boxing to be ready for shipping. We aren't at the full automation stage yet and we still do everything by hand. I love my job here because there are so many additional quirks to the role that I feel is just perfect for the way I cognitively work. The master distiller whom I work with daily is incredibly supportive and lets me run with my 'different' ideas; some work, some don't. Regarding the ones that don't, I'm not met with anger 'for stuffing around' like has happened at every other job I've worked. I think they just enjoy seeing something different."

"We had no idea when he started working for us" Martellozzo said. "But more importantly, we don't care."

He's been working with us for over 12 months now and we're incredibly lucky to have him. He looks at things from a different perspective and consistently builds improvement into our processes".

Meeting the challenges

Looking back to those critical moments in the French Alps and his life today, Martellozzo believes he is one of the lucky ones. He was candid about how he felt when he thought the life as he knew it was taken away in a heartbeat. Whilst he says that "it sucks that there will always be restrictions and I physically cannot do everything I want to, it's incredible how many opportunities have come my way." His advice is to "embrace it. Don't be scared like I was and don't be afraid to speak up for yourself or ask people for help if you need it".

He said people come up and start doing things for him without asking. "I appreciate that they mean well when they are trying to help me push up a hill or open a door for me, but I am still capable. I like to keep my independence where I can, and I don't care about protecting my ego. If I need help, I will ask for it."

An example of this was during his solo journeys across Europe in 2016, lugging a backpack and suitcase. Visiting a cathedral in Copenhagen he was confronted by a long flight of stairs to the entrance which were impossible to navigate in his wheelchair. "Two guys were standing there talking and I gestured to them with a lifting motion of my hands to my wheelchair. These guys helped me up the stairs and a different group were happy to help me back down when I left. If I didn't have the confidence to ask, I would have missed out"

Perhaps a measure of his independence was evident that before leaving Australia, he bought a one-way ticket to Poland. "I wanted to go to Scandinavia, so from Poland I booked a flight to Estonia then boats to Finland and Sweden, trains through Norway and a flight down to Denmark."

He met up with friends in some cities but travelled on his own, determined to

prove that he had the capacity to meet any challenges.

"I did many amazing things and met new people I am still friends with today. Absolutely there were situations I missed out on because they were physically impossible, but you will be surprised at how much is there to experience if you approach it the right way. You never know what is around the next corner. It's better to get there expecting sunshine on the other side than storms. The trip in 2016 was awesome... one of the best trips of my life and I'm always planning my next trip."

He said a strong network of family and friends has always been around to support him, especially through the initial stages of rehabilitation, and without them it would have been difficult.

He works Monday to Friday in his main job as an investment performance and risk analyst with Morningstar. The distillery is his weekend role, either working on site or attending related events and markets.

But supporting the charity is very much front-of-mind and he wants to do all he can to raise its profile in the community. He is confident a cure for spinal cord injuries will be found and the more funding that goes into research the better.

"If you put enough money into the research, even pigs will fly. Let's just forget about the pigs for the moment and help me get back on my feet first. Put that money into spinal cord injury research instead" ●



Volunteering with the Jawun Foundation with a smoking ceremony at Lake Mungo