

A full-page background image showing a person rappelling down a steep, rocky mountain face. The person is wearing a dark jacket and light-colored shoes, and is holding onto a rope. The mountain is covered in green vegetation, and the background shows a dense forest under a blue sky with some clouds.

thrills

When doctors told adventurer Chris Astill that one day he'd be doing all the things he used to do, just differently, "I don't think they knew what that meant".

Astill was a competition surfer, paraglider, mountain biker and mountaineer, travelling to extreme locations around the world.

"I just asked them to leave the room so I could get my head around it," he says. "My whole life has been around outdoor adventure and sport.

"It was devastating to think I might lose that, but I also thought, maybe it doesn't have to be over."

The mountains that move you

At the time, he was lying in a hospital bed with a severed spine and most of his skeleton broken after his paraglider collapsed twice mid-flight in northeastern New South Wales in June 2021, smashing him into the ground.

Ironically, Astill and his partner Jasmine were part of the NSW SES Search and Rescue Team and the Vertical Rescue Team, specialist volunteer units that operate deep in the wilderness and on high-angle rescues.

"Jazz actually trained for that scenario a few weeks prior, wrapping and packing me for helicopter extraction. And then she was doing it for real."

Four months later while in spinal rehab, Astill began training for all the things he used to do, just differently.

Less than a year after the accident, he took his first adaptive surfing sessions at an indoor surf facility and transitioned to ocean surfing before he'd even been discharged from hospital.

In May 2022, Astill entered his first competition (the Adaptive Surfing World Tour in Hawaii) before competing internationally across adaptive sports.

Along the way, he founded the Adaptive Athlete Academy (Facebook @AdaptiveAthlete.Academy) to support athletes in non-traditional or emerging adaptive sports like surfing, skydiving, mountaineering and climbing (Astill does all).

The Sydney Adaptive Boardriders Club he launched in August 2022 with four members grew to more than 160 in a year.

Astill also helped bring the indoor skydiving championships to Penrith in August 2025 and arranged an outdoor adventure day in the Mountains for five para-athletes with fellow SES search and rescue volunteers, Blue Mountains Climbing School owners Hugh Ward and Bridie Campbell.

The team completed a wheelchair Tyrolean traverse high above the Megalong Valley, crossing a ravine using ropes strung between a rock outcrop and solid ground.

"It was that windy no other operation would have run," Astill says, "but I



IMAGES Rodrigo Soares Instagram @rod_soares_

completely trusted Hugh and Bridie.

"They're at the elite level of what they do on ropes, and they're just the right people: patient, solutions-based thinkers with huge hearts."

Ward says the admiration runs both ways and he, Bridie and Declan were "stoked" to help ensure an adventure, with National Parks & Wildlife Service helping to get vehicle access as close as was safe to the site.

"It was quite windy on the day, but the group were as tough as they were keen.

"It's always interesting helping folks onto the Tyrolean; everyone's a bit different, so we improvise. From the existing dings and scrapes, it was obvious how adventurous the gang are."

BY ELLEN HILL

For Astill, the Blue Mountains is far more than a spectacular backdrop.

"Those mountains represent everything I was told I couldn't do – and everything I've fought to do again," he says.

"The world can seem very small and shrunken when you end up in a situation like mine, but these sorts of activities and places like the Blue Mountains expand that."

Find out about Blue Mountains Climbing School at climbingschool.com.au

Blue Mountains Climbing School recently won Gold at the NSW Tourism Awards for Excellence in Accessible Tourism