

SHARP AIM, OPEN ARMS

Axe throwing is an unexpectedly inclusive sport - just perfect your technique **WORDS: ELLEN HILL**

The axe hits the timber with a sharp, final thud.

Dr Tristan Campbell exhales. His shoulders drop. For a moment, everything is still.

Parkinson's disease is not supposed to look like this.

Diagnosed in his early 40s, Tristan lives with a condition that turns movement into a daily negotiation – some days fluid, others heavy and unpredictable.

Needless to say, axe throwing looked more like a risk than a remedy at first.

Now, it's a release: the weight in his hand, the spin, the sound.

Throwing an axe doesn't fight Parkinson's, but it does settle it.

TECHNIQUE OVER MUSCLE

"Axe throwing isn't about strength, it's about precision, timing, distance and release," says Bede Burke, national operations manager at MANIAX, which helped introduce the sport to Australia more than a decade ago.

"That's what makes it so accessible. Almost anyone can learn to do it well."

At first glance, axe throwing looks like a sport designed for the strong and steady.

Spend time inside a venue though, and

a different picture emerges, one where coaching trumps brute force.

At MANIAX venues across the country, coaches routinely adapt techniques for people with limited mobility, balance challenges or reduced strength.

Lighter axes, adjusted distances and alternative grips are all part of the toolkit.

Some throwers sit on stools or throw from wheelchairs.

"Sometimes the smallest adjustment is the difference," Bede says. "We'll try different axes, change stance, slow things down. We don't give up on people – we work with them."

MANIAX venues are wheelchair accessible, with lanes for seated throwing.

The aim is never to dilute the experience but preserve the thrill: that heart-lifting moment when the axe spins once and sinks cleanly into timber.

A SPORT THAT LISTENS

What sets axe throwing apart from many traditional sports is its culture of genuine equality, support and encouragement.

"We make sure no one feels left behind," Bede says.

Every session begins with one-on-one coaching, allowing staff to tailor instruction to each person's ability and

confidence.

Assistance animals, including guide dogs, are welcome and MANIAX accepts the Companion Card, allowing carers or support people to participate at no extra cost.

That spirit carries through to competition level, which operates under international rules and rankings but remains strikingly inclusive.

"It's one size fits all," Bede says. "We don't separate people by ability. The movement is the same for everyone – throw, release, repeat."

There are no men's and women's divisions. Everyone is judged purely on accuracy.

PARKINSON'S, PRECISION AND CONFIDENCE

For Tristan, competitive axe throwing is more than a pastime.

Diagnosed while completing a doctorate in applied physics, Parkinson's forced Tristan to abandon fieldwork.

Tasks once taken for granted – typing, mouse control, mobility – became daily obstacles.

He first tried axe throwing in 2022 after his wife Blaine enjoyed it, so the family decided to give it a go.

"For me, throwing an axe is actually easier than sitting still during 'off' medication periods," he says. "The motion helps my mobility, and the weight in my hand makes my brain engage differently."

Beyond the physical benefits, axe throwing offered something rarer: a space where symptoms didn't need to be explained or hidden.

"Good day or bad day doesn't matter," he says. "I can show up exactly as I am."

Tristan now throws two to four times a week and has competed in international championships.

He also founded Give Parkinson's the



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- **Companion Card:** Carers and support people throw free
- **Assistance animals:** Accredited animals welcome
- **Mobility & seating:** Wheelchair-accessible venues. Seated throwing, stools and adjusted distances available
- **Booking tip:** Contact venue ahead to discuss needs

Axe, to raise awareness of early onset Parkinson's and encourages others with disabilities to try the sport.

"The change you see in people is incredible," he says. "They arrive thinking, 'I can't do this'. Then they hit their first clean target and something shifts. Confidence replaces doubt."

ADAPTATION WITHOUT COMPROMISE

Venues have developed practical solutions for a wide range of access needs, from tactile markers for vision impaired throwers to support for wheelchair users.

"These aren't loopholes," Tristan says. "They're sensible adaptations that allow people to compete fairly and safely."

Importantly, none of these adjustments undermine the sport. Accuracy still reigns supreme. Calm still beats force. Nerves still spike when competitors decide whether to go for the high-risk 'clutch' target on a final throw.

"We see everyone: people with disabilities, older throwers, kids, LGBTQI+ communities, former athletes whose bodies can't handle high-impact sport anymore," Burke says. "Everyone is welcome."

"You don't need to be 'sporty'," Tristan says. "You just need curiosity."

Typically indoors, weather-proof and centrally located, axe throwing venues are easy to slot into a travel itinerary.

Sessions are structured, supported and short enough to avoid fatigue, while staff are accustomed to answering questions and adapting sessions on the fly.

As Tristan puts it: "It's not about competing. It's about doing something you didn't think you could – and realising you absolutely can." ●

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A wheelchair user lining up his throw