

LOVING IT: Hunter Boccia player Phil Bates in action at the 2014 NSW titles in Sydney.



Sidelineer scores top titles



Georgia
OSLAND

WHAT started as a hobby for Cardiff South boccia player Phil Bates has led him to be a national sportsman.

Bates, 65, was born with muscular dystrophy, a genetic disease that gradually weakens the body.

He has used a wheelchair for the past 20 years, leaving him physically inactive.

Even as a young man, Bates was unable to play sport.

"I was always too weak to play normal sports," he said.

"I'd be the one to sit on the sidelines and score, so it's great that I can play boccia."

About four years ago, he discovered boccia, a sport related to bowls and petanque and similar to bocce. It is designed for athletes with a disability who require a wheelchair.

Bates went to a come-and-try day on the Central Coast – where he learned the game's aim to throw leather balls as close as possible to the white target ball or jack – and he instantly loved it.

He returned home and joined

Hunter Boccia, which has about 15 members who meet every Wednesday at Kahibah Sports Club to train. They also have lunch together.

Bates said initially it was the social side of the sport he enjoyed.

However, he went on to compete at state then national levels.

Bates has played at the state boccia titles for the past three years.

Last year he won gold in the open division.

He also took home bronze from the 2013 Australian National Boccia Championships.

His most recent wins were last month at the New Zealand National Boccia Championships.

After taking silver in the pairs competition, he went on to defeat all 23 other players in the open singles and claim gold.

Bates said the road to success was long, but he couldn't have done it without his fellow Hunter Boccia players.

He said almost every player fell into a different sporting class, depending on the degree of their disability, but they all trained together.

"That's what makes us one of the strongest teams in the country."