

A powerfully-built man, pictured from below, powers through the clear waters of a swimming pool. Dark goggles cover his eyes, and a swimming cap covers his hair. Adorned in a tight black pair of trunks, he angles his muscular body towards the camera, reaching his right arm – his only arm – towards the left of the black-and-white image. His left arm is a stump, and is pressed against his ribcage at the top of his body, while his legs, also stumps, are on the right of the image. Bubbles are scattered around his form and his head, which breaks the surface of water in the centre of the photograph.

The contrast of light and dark means you can clearly see the outline of his muscles and his ribs, while the top of his head is out of view. His fingers are stretched to their maximum length, grasping for the walls of the pool, and his expression, obscured slightly by bubbles, shows a raw determination, his steely gaze fixed on its target.

In similar images, the left arm might be raised and the legs would be kicking, working in unison to propel him through the water as quickly as possible. Yet his left arm and his legs aren't there, and although the image is static, the disturbed water, bubbles rising to its surface, and the stark contrast between light and dark indicate speed, power, control, and motion.

The man was born with congenital amputation, a condition where limbs are not formed in utero. Despite only having one arm, he displays the physicality, technique, and grace of an elite swimmer. And that is precisely what he is.

Darko Duric has had an incredibly successful career as an athlete. He has represented Slovenia at the 2012 and 2016 Paralympics Games, won two World Championships gold medals in 2013 (for 100m Freestyle and 50m Butterfly), and claimed silver and bronze European medals in 2016. He also broke the world record in the 50m Butterfly S4 class in 2012.

And Butterfly is the perfect stroke for Darko, because when he swims, it's like he's turned the water into wings. It's as though he's flying, even though he's submerged.

For a long time, I had wanted to convey his incredible story, or at least part of it, in a single image. In an attempt to do this, I used a Canon EOS 5D Mark IV with a Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L III USM lens and rooted myself to the bottom of a pool in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana. Then I asked him to swim over me.

In the world of sports, where physical prowess and the pursuit of perfection is sometimes celebrated above all else, Darko is a reminder that physical strength is only part of what makes us resilient. As he propels himself through the water, every stroke is a symbol of his unwavering determination to overcome the obstacles that life has thrown his way.

Often, it feels as though we can be defined by our differences, but this image unites us in a shared humanity. It reminds us that, regardless of our individual circumstances, we are all capable of achieving wonderful and remarkable things.

Darko's incredible journey, and his many successes, serve as a reminder that each and every one of us can question our boundaries, our limitations, and our concept of possibility.

The moody tones and stark monochrome palette make this photograph even more dramatic. While flecks of light dance on the surface, making the pool look like a rolling, wild ocean, the corners of the image are so lacking in light, they're almost black – it seems as though he is swimming in darkness.

And while he may face challenges or adversity on land, being in the water tells a different story. Like a bird in flight, or a shark in the murky depths, Darko has an effortless command of his environment. One look at this image and you think, “he’s at home here”.

The black-and-white image is part of a series of photographs in which I captured Darko in his element – ranging from portraits of him on a diving board to action shots, where he bursts through the water at remarkable speed.

I have taken many photographs of countless subjects in my career, yet this is one of a few that I’m most proud of. Not simply because of its composition, or the balance of darkness and light, but because it makes you think. It makes you ask challenging questions. It makes you look at things a little differently.

It urges us to rethink not only our view of sport, but our view of what we believe is possible. It tells us not to accept convention, to look beyond our “limitations” and to push forwards, as Darko is doing, and aim for something that may seem out of reach.

When I look at this photograph, I am not looking at an image of a disabled person in the water, I’m seeing Darko for who he is: a pioneer, a record-breaker, a champion.

Capturing Darko’s power, determination, and his essence was not easy. It involved hours of planning and plenty of different takes of him gliding through the water. But eventually I feel as though I captured Darko and his incredible story. Part of that came from changing my approach and my perspective, and climbing into the pool with him to see what he sees and feel what he feels.

In the image, we are with him in the pool, shoulder to shoulder, almost as though we’re a fellow swimmer, competing against him. And as we dive further into the depths of this photograph, we recognise that we are not simply spectators, but participants in his remarkable journey. We are reminded that the human spirit knows no bounds, and that, like Darko, we too can spread our wings and soar.

This photograph encapsulates the essence of our resilience, our determination, and the uncompromising pursuit of excellence. It tells its audience a story that goes beyond the boundaries of sports and speaks to who we are as people.

I hope that it encourages us all to redefine our perceptions of what is possible, while serving as an enduring testament to the things any of us can achieve, regardless of our circumstances.