



melbourne's heroes

PHOTOGRAPHY BY | LUCAS DAWSON

MERELY FINISHING A MARATHON IS AN HEROIC ACHIEVEMENT. NO DOUBT, EACH OF THE 16,000-PLUS COMPETITORS WHO TOOK PART IN THE MELBOURNE MARATHON FESTIVAL IN OCTOBER HAS THEIR OWN TALE OF TRIUMPH. **DAVE SUTHERLAND** CAUGHT UP WITH THREE OF THEM TO SHARE THEIR SPECIAL STORY.

SETTING A GOAL SUCH AS A HALF or full marathon and achieving it requires a special strength of character; a certain will and courage to draw upon for when the going gets tough. But for Derek Burford, Brett Saxon and Georgia Mills, running 42 and 21 kilometres was far from their toughest test to date.

This One's For You, Mate

First time competitor Derek Burford never expected to win the marathon. He was, however, driven by a deep-seated and heartfelt motivation. At 48, Derek has been reasonably fit for most of his life, and often dreamed of running a marathon but, for a variety of reasons, never quite made it. A few years ago he came within a whisker of running the Gold Coast marathon, only to suffer a meniscus tear in his knee just before the race which forced him to withdraw. The injury required an operation which left him unable to run for over a year.

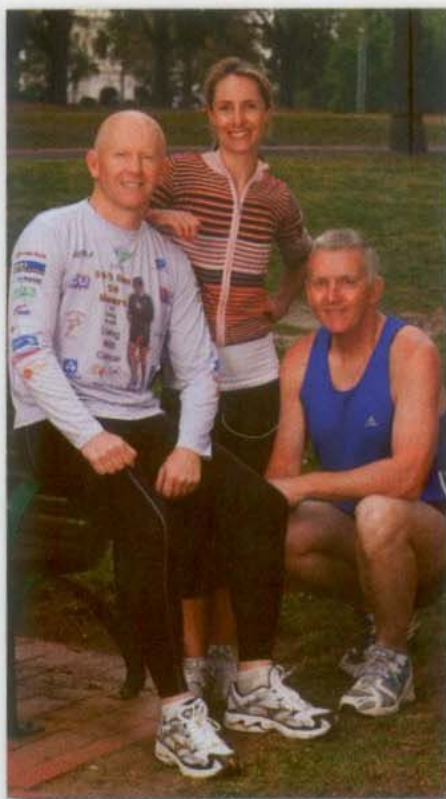
When he resumed running it was in the company of his brother-in-law, Kurt Bruhn. Together the two men would jog a 12 kilometre course through the scenic bushland near Kurt's mother's house in Bendigo. It was on one of these runs that they agreed to complete a full marathon together.

Tragically, only months after making this pledge, Kurt Bruhn passed away, the 44-year-old a victim of sudden heart attack. It was among the ashes of their grief that Derek and his wife Leisl (Kurt's younger sister) made their own pact to run the marathon together in memory of their beloved Kurt.

"We were shocked and devastated and going through all those thoughts of, 'oh, what a waste'," says Derek. "We just thought life's far too short to miss out on opportunities, and so we decided to run for our own sakes, and to honour and remember Kurt at the same time."

Derek would run in the full marathon, and Leisl — who had only started running a few years previously — would run the half. Busy working lives and three growing daughters restricted their training time, however.

"Leisl and I would alternate our training runs either before the children awoke, during our work lunch breaks or in between the kids' dancing or swimming lessons," says Derek. "On weekends we did our best to get some serious miles into our legs — when we could."



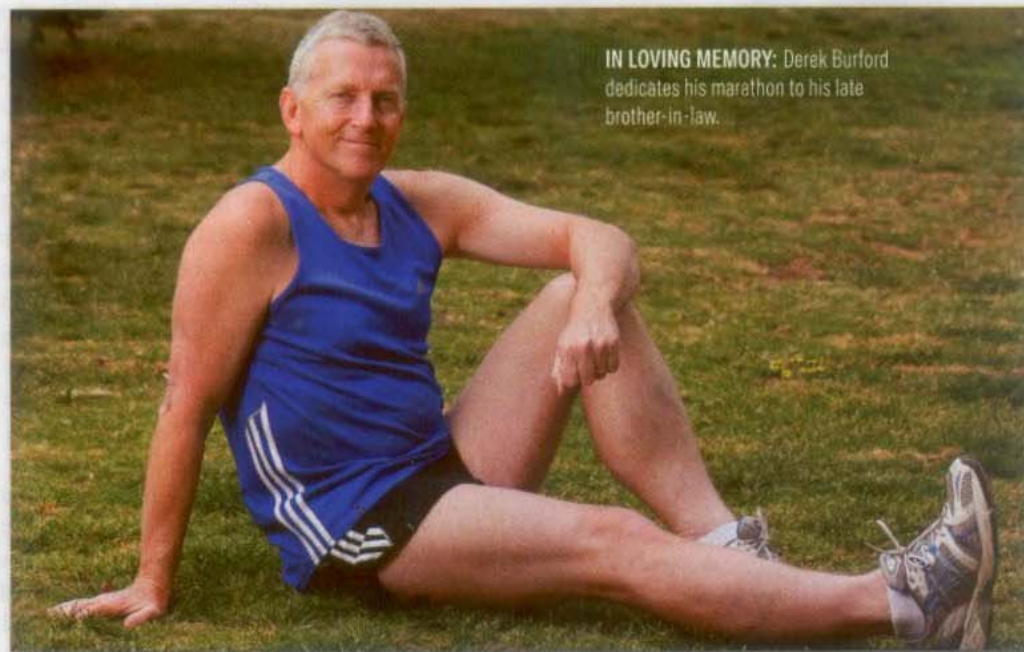
Fate threw another spanner in the works six weeks out from the race when Derek fell ill with a severe bout of the flu, which left him bedridden for a week and "not much chop" for the next couple of weeks. He missed two weeks of crucial training, and felt weak as the race approached. He even thought about pulling out, but with Leisl's support and in the memory of Kurt he battled on and made it to the starting line.

With the name KURT written in large Texta letters on their forearms for inspiration, they both set off in the early morning sunshine along Wellington Parade South with over 16,000 other runners. Fully aware of his interrupted training regime, Derek hoped to finish the race in less than five hours and "still be able to stand upright."

The first 10K flew past. "My mind was clear, I wasn't busting a gut, just enjoying the scenery and being among a throng of joggers going through a beautiful part of town." It wasn't until the 32 kilometre mark (around Luna Park on the way back towards town) that his legs began to feel 'like concrete'.

"That was when it became a case of mind over matter," he says. "I looked down at my arm and said: 'Come on Kurt, just help me get to the G.' And he did. As soon as I saw the G out of the corner of my eye, all the pain went away. I was running past people staggering from side to side, and others lying beside the road crying, but I just felt like I was going up a gear. Coming through Birrurung Marr, across the William Barak Bridge the crowd just spurred me on, and running through the tunnel and into the MCG I thought of Kerryn McCann doing the same thing at the Commonwealth Games, and I thought of Kurt, and I looked at the sky and yelled 'thank you!'."

Crossing the line on the green grass in front of the Members Stand at the MCG (in 4:38:16), Derek went straight to where his wife — who had finished the half marathon



IN LOVING MEMORY: Derek Burford dedicates his marathon to his late brother-in-law.

a couple of hours earlier — and daughters waited behind the fence. They all embraced in tears, whispering Kurt's name in a complex combination of sadness and joy.

Man on a Mission

Brett Saxon didn't begin running seriously until 2005. At the beginning of that year he weighed over 100 kilograms and, deciding to take steps to remedy the situation, he began cycling, and then running, gradually increasing the distances over time. The weight fell off rapidly, and Brett found himself covering longer distances at greater speed. He realised that he was enjoying it; enjoying challenging himself, improving his times, and importantly, feeling fit and healthy and happier than he had been for years.

He ran the Melbourne half marathon that year, and after that race decided to truly test himself and aim for the full marathon a year later. A methodical trainer, he spent the 18 weeks leading up to the race completing a structured program which included speedwork, hillwork, building up to the longer runs and then tapering off as the race approached. Crossing the finishing line of

the 2006 marathon in a time just under four hours was the culmination of almost two years of an altered approach to life.

"Marathons can change you," says Brett. "You have a lot of thoughts out there pounding the pavement. I was just feeling fortunate to have some pretty good health back after years of not being healthy, when theoretically I could have ended up with any condition really. Those feelings just led to a desire to do something to help others not as fortunate."

Brett decided to do what he could to raise money and awareness for CanTeen, a support network for 12 to 24-year-olds with cancer.

"A large part of what they do is take these kids away from the dark and dreary side of cancer and give them a chance to enjoy life," he says. "It gets them out of hospitals and having some fun."

Brett devised a way of combining his recently discovered love for endurance running and his desire to make a difference and came up with the idea for a sponsored event called 'Brett's Run for CanTeen'. The event is a 162 kilometre run over 24 hours, and he's aiming to raise \$25,000. The 2007 Melbourne Marathon occurred during his long term preparation for this mammoth run, so his approach was different to 2006. He had the endurance base but wanted to get his time down and so concentrated mainly on speedwork.

And the result? An enjoyable race in which Brett ran alongside some of his mates during the initial stages, "just loved being there and competing with like-minded souls." He felt stronger as the race progressed (with his 10K splits becoming faster each time) and he eventually crossed the line in 3:53:23, feeling happy to be alive and healthy and on the hallowed turf of the MCG. Amid the euphoria he was also thinking about his friends at CanTeen who aren't quite so lucky.

Running For Life

There were others running that day in the name of cancer. Around a year ago Georgia Mills must have felt that her own luck had deserted her. Only 36-years-old

at the time, the former yoga teacher was diagnosed with endometrial cancer, which resulted in a hysterectomy. Recovery from the traumatic operation took six weeks, and then the chemotherapy and radiation therapy started.

"It was devastating," says Georgia who, remarkably, less than a year later, ran the Melbourne Half Marathon. "Especially considering I didn't have any children, and now couldn't have any. Going through early menopause wasn't much fun either. There's a lot of depression mixed in with fear about the cancer — a whole showbag of stuff to deal with really."

Coming out of the intensive phase of her treatment Georgia began walking her dog to "get some fresh air and to keep myself sane." Occasionally she would break into a run to see how she fared. She had lost a lot of weight and felt quite feeble, but to prove to herself that she was on the road to full recovery she decided to enter the four kilometre Mother's Day Classic in May.

"I was pretty skinny and not very strong but I thought that if I needed to I would just walk," she says. "And I loved it. It felt fantastic to be part of a large group of people who were just there to do nothing but run."

At breakfast afterwards, with a glass of champagne in her hand and her family emotional around her, Georgia announced that she would run in the Melbourne half marathon. Around about the same time she also decided to represent the Royal Women's Hospital, to raise money and awareness of the good work done by that institution, and to present herself as an example of a positive cancer story.

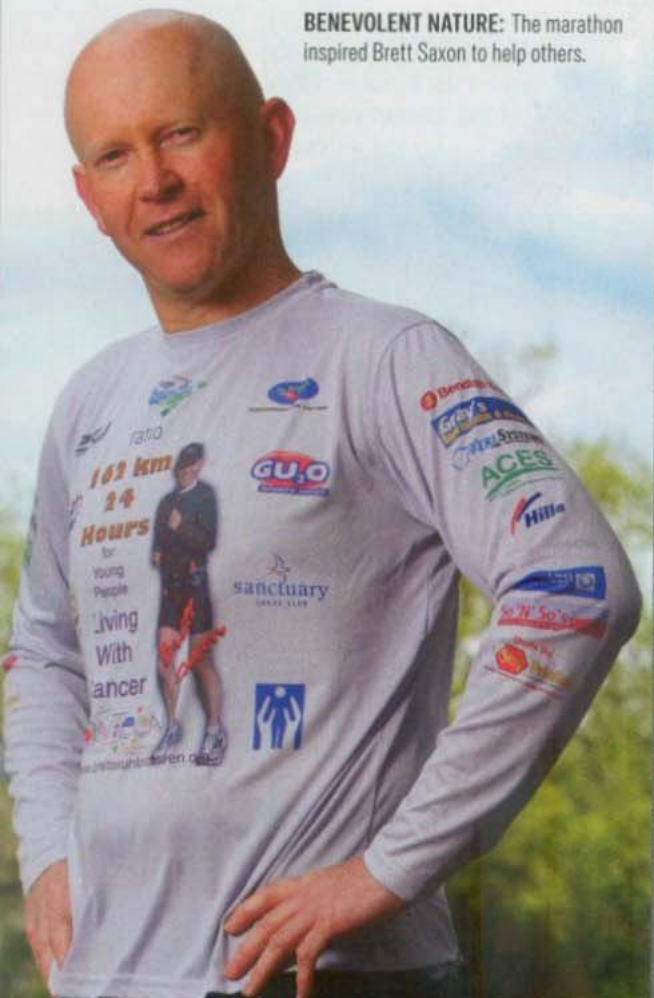
"Most of the stories you see on TV and in the newspapers are of people dying," she says. "I wanted to show people that you can participate in life, you can be young and fit and healthy even with a cancer diagnosis behind you."

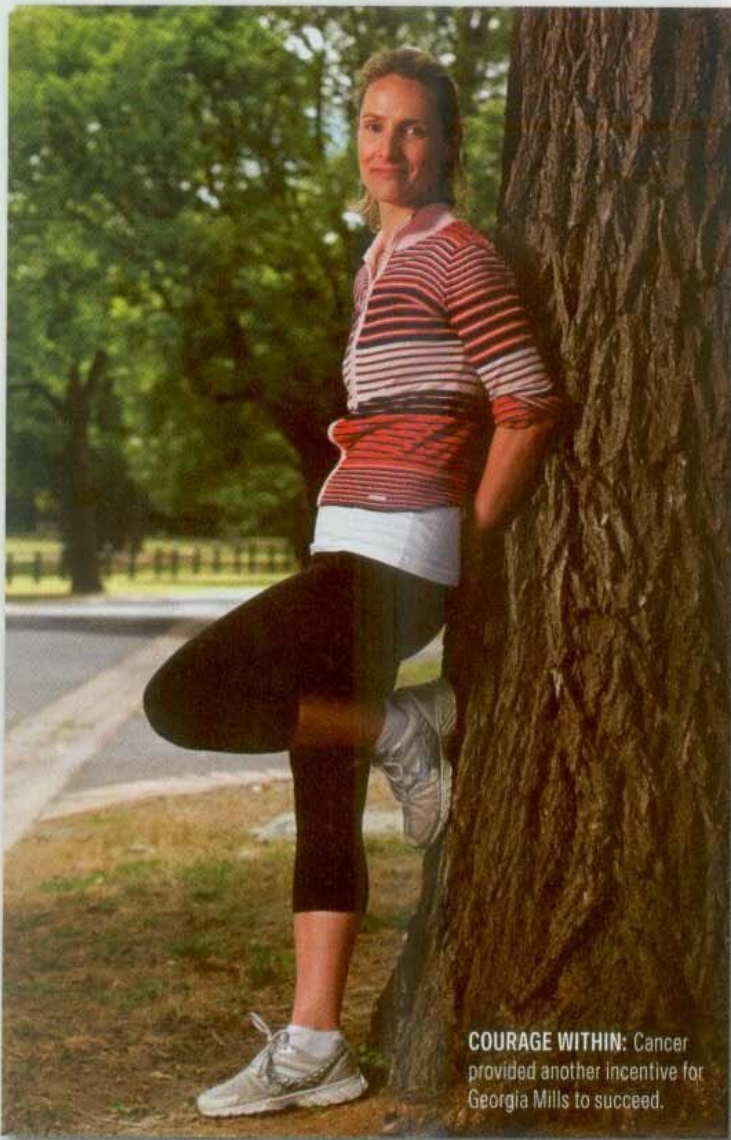
Tragedy intervened shortly before the race again when one of Georgia's best friends died in a freak accident. Shane had been her training mate, and the shock of his death was almost enough to make Georgia pull out.

"But then I thought, well he's another reason for me to do it, I'll run for him as well," says Georgia. "And I'd made a commitment, to myself and to the people who had sponsored me, to run the race. So I had to go ahead."

Like many of the competitors in the

BENEVOLENT NATURE: The marathon inspired Brett Saxon to help others.





COURAGE WITHIN: Cancer provided another incentive for Georgia Mills to succeed.

Samsung Melbourne Marathon, Georgia followed Kerryn McCann's training program leading up to the race. She arrived at the starting line confident she'd put in the hard work, and with a feeling that, having overcome the worst that life had to throw at her, she could now overcome anything. She also felt fitter than she had been before the onset of her illness.

At the starting line the words of her counsellor echoed through her mind.

"She just said to run the race like you lead your life," says Georgia. "To see it as something I'd made a commitment to participate in, but something that I didn't need to win to achieve what I wanted. I didn't need to push myself or hurt myself, I could just go as hard as I wanted to. The most important thing was that I enjoyed it."

And enjoy it she did. She felt part of a large, vital group of people, all of whom were running simply because they loved to run, and she finished the race in 1:58:22.

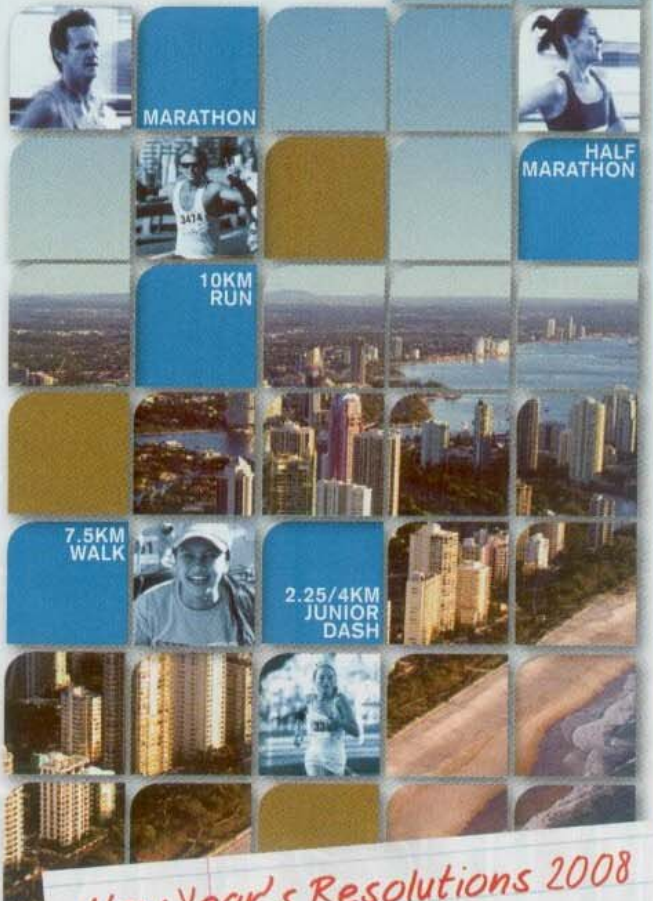
"As I ran I thought of how lucky I was to be out on a beautiful day, running along a glorious path with inspiring and happy people," she says. "I felt immense gratitude for everyone and every experience that had helped me get to this place — which I really wouldn't have thought was possible nine months ago."

RW



SUNDAY
06 JULY 08

Gold Coast Airport MARATHON



New Year's Resolutions 2008

- Eat well, be healthy, run hard.
- Take more holidays.
- Heed above Resolutions and "Embrace the Next Step" at the Gold Coast Airport Marathon. Stay for a mid-winter break.
- Log on to www.goldcoastmarathon.com.au in mid February to download and begin my interactive training program.
- Run well. Have fun!

celebrating **30** years
2008

EMBRACETM
NEXT
STEP

