

WE WON'T LET IT WIN!

Multiple sclerosis won't keep us away from our sporting passions

Multiple sclerosis is a condition of the nervous system which affects over 25,600 Aussies. Although there's no cure, this hasn't stopped these two inspiring women from fulfilling their dreams. To find out more about MS, visit www.msaustralia.org.au/

Cycling has given me a new lease on life

BACK IN THE FAST LANE

Emily Petricola, 40, Adelaide, SA.

I looked down at my new shoes and wondered if I'd made the wrong choice.

Lately, I'd been tripping over my feet a lot, and couldn't work out why. So, in my lunch break, I bought new shoes. But my tripping kept happening.

Soon after, I noticed a

numbness spreading from my feet to my chest, even creeping towards my neck.

I was 27 and running my own business, but these symptoms worried me.

One night I called a friend in desperation.

"You need to call me at 7am tomorrow," I began.

"If I don't answer, come around because it means that I can't walk."

Next morning, I was no better so I went to a doctor, who found a lesion on my spinal chord.

"We'll run tests, but it could be MS," he said.

At that moment I was convinced I had multiple sclerosis. But when it was confirmed the next week, it was hard to accept.

I'd always been a sporty kid and had excelled at rowing. Now, I was struggling with basic movements.

Over the next few years I suffered from facial numbness and vertigo.

I had to take steroids to keep my body functioning and piled on weight as a result.

Is this worth it? I wondered, in a fog of depression,

But it was sobering to go to the hospital each month for infusions, where I'd see people with terminal illness battling as best they could.

You could be much worse off, I reminded myself.

At 32, I found the strength to go on a holiday to Egypt with my friend, Jen. Seeing the pyramids, I was overcome with emotion.

My life wasn't over yet. Despite my condition, there was so much to live for.

Back home, I returned to my love of rowing, as a coach.

My mate, Matt, an Olympic rower listened to me talk about how much I wanted to exercise again. But MS made it so hard. I couldn't even swim because the water was too hot for my body.

Matt worked out a program where I'd ride a stationary bike with a fan in front of it, and I built up my strength.

"You're doing great," he encouraged. "Why don't you try para-cycling?"

It was a cycling sport adapted in various ways for people with disabilities.

"There was so much to live for"



I was inspired on my trip to Egypt



As a teenager, I excelled at rowing

After years of training, I eventually competed in the 2018 Para-Cycling Track World Championships in Brazil, where I won both silver and bronze medals.

The next year, I won gold in the Netherlands and I'll compete in my first Paralympics in Tokyo when I can, where I've got my sights set on gold.

I'd be lying if I said getting here wasn't hard work, but riding has brought part of the old 'me' back. I understand when others with illness tell me it's all too much - it can be.

But my journey with MS has taught me the importance of focusing on what you can do, not what you can't.



Playing cricket is important to me

TWENTY FOUR, NOT OUT!

Jemma Barsby, 24, Adelaide, SA.

I winced as the pain in my shoulder grew stronger. I'd just finished an intense season of cricket and thought the discomfort had come from all the hard training I'd been doing.

But when my fingertips went numb, pins and needles spread through my body and the pain was still there weeks later, my doctor sent me for MRIs. When I went to get my results, the doctor looked at me seriously.

I knew then, at 19 years old, that something was wrong. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a condition I'd only vaguely heard of before.

The first thing I did was google it, and freaked out seeing stories of people in wheelchairs who could barely move.

This can't happen to me! I thought.

I was a professional cricketer who dreamed of playing for my country.

My whole family cried when I told them, but at the specialist a few days later, she had good news.

"It's a mild case," she said.

"So I can still play cricket?" I asked hopefully.

She nodded and it was the best news I could have hoped for under the circumstances.

I needed daily medication to control my condition. But there were days when fatigue crippled me, my vision blurred, and my whole body tingled with pins and needles.

Still, I refused to let it keep me off the field.

I came across an Aussie woman with MS who's a champion at taekwondo, and her story made me realise just how much was possible for both me and others in a similar position.

Now, playing cricket in summer is difficult for me; I need cooling devices to keep my body temperature even. But I've been

part of the Queensland Fire and Brisbane Heat teams and have recently moved to South Australia to play. I've got a competitive spirit and I think that's helped me in my refusal to let MS beat me.

By sharing my story, I hope I can show others that you can still enjoy life.

Sure, you'll have bad days, but make the best of the good ones and don't ever give up!

"I refused to let it keep me off the field"



Receiving treatment in hospital