

Running from Within

ANN PARROTT SHED 72 KILOS – AND GAINED A TON OF CONFIDENCE. BY DOMINIC CADDEN

PHOTOGRAPHY: CASSANDRA ELLIOTT

ANN PARROTT, 46, TRIED TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME AS SHE RACED down the Giant Stairway in the Blue Mountains of NSW. She put out her left arm using the railing to swing herself around the bend. Bad move – that was her broken arm. The pain shot up to her shoulder. She stumbled and cracked her knee against the bar. The leg stiffened in the cold and it took the next hour to descend the remaining 800 steps. How would she get through this? There was still 30 kilometres to go.

Ann thought back to the journey that had got her to this point. She remembered the lonely teenage years struggling with drug and alcohol abuse. She remembered the accident they said would confine her to a wheelchair by her 30th birthday. She'd defied the odds then. Now would be no different.

A ROCKY ROAD

Having suffered chronic back pain for most of her life – the result of an alcohol induced accident in her teens – Ann Parrott decided, just weeks after her 36th birthday to undergo back surgery. It was a last ditch attempt that she and the doctors hoped would

ease the pain. The surgery was intricate and involved fusing Ann's sacro-iliac joint and lower spine. It took six months of intensive rehab before she was walking, unassisted. But a decade would pass before she could run.

"I was married at the time and lifting the occasional weight or two at a small gym we owned, but I used my back and the pain as an excuse not to do more," recalls Ann. "In a handful of years after the surgery, I managed to put on 50 kilograms."

The tipping point for Ann came when she was visiting Dreamworld, one of the Gold Coast's popular theme parks with her children, Tobias and Storm. A new seatbelt system on her favourite ride meant two people had to squeeze her in so tight that she couldn't breathe. She panicked and yelled to be released before the ride even started.

"I was so embarrassed for my children," recalls Ann. Shortly after, in May 2005, Ann decided to take action.

STARTING SOMEWHERE

Ann's first step was to conquer her lethargy. She set strict sleeping times and built regular eating patterns around them.

Having become increasingly withdrawn since her operation and weight gain, group exercise was simply not an option.

"I wouldn't even go to the shops because I was worried about bumping into someone. My daughter was basically my spokesperson. It's only now that I realise the pressure I must have put on her."

Ann began training in hiding. Walking and stepping to an exercise DVD in her living room, she progressed to walking late at night along the boardwalk near her home at Kings Beach on the Sunshine Coast.

"Sometimes I would start to run, but if people came toward me, I would stop and pretend I was looking at the beach."

Eventually, after losing 30 kilograms Ann felt ready to join her local gym, where, still painfully withdrawn, she spent six months hiding in the corner on a cross-trainer.

SETTING NEW GOALS

The hard work started to pay off and in 2006 with her confidence growing Ann accepted a job on Queensland's Whitsunday coast.



ENDURING FRIENDSHIP:
Ann and personal trainer, Michelle Murphy.

"I thought that most people would say that they can't do that race. But I didn't see any reason why I couldn't."

NOTHING'S STOPPING ME, NOW

Starting out on short trails near her home, Ann tackled the wet season head on.

"It was always muddy, slippery and hot, but I actually found it quite beautiful.

"I started off badly, the downhill were especially difficult, but I couldn't think of anything more exciting or exhilarating. None of it seemed like exercise."

Every run seemed different and Ann loved the challenge that came from not knowing whether her footfall was going to land on a rock or go for a slide.

As with many runners Ann's instinct was to keep her goal to herself, but soon she realised she'd need the help of her trainer, Michelle Murphy.

Her training regimen was intense – stair climbs, long runs of up to 54 kilometres, running with a heavy backpack and a midnight run through the rainforest with a headlamp. In fact, she was doing too much.

"On top of the running I was doing combat classes and weights, despite my trainer warning me to cut back because I was over-stressing my body."

It was advice she wished she'd listened to.

Four weeks out from race-day, Ann tripped in combat class and fearing for her ankles, she twisted and fell onto her left side breaking her arm.

Pushing on she tried to keep running for two weeks, but the pain in her arm was excruciating, so she had the arm set in plaster. Less than two weeks out from the race Ann and her trainer experimented with different running techniques to protect the healing bones. But no matter what they tried she felt awkward and unbalanced from the weight of the plaster.

She began to fear race officials would force her to withdraw from the event that she had trained so hard for.

"In hindsight, with all the rocky sections, the steep climbs and downhill dashes, I would understand if they had pulled me out."

about people saying you can't do things. You get it as a child and it goes on from there. But here was this guy, who was all about: 'yes, you can', no matter what the distance."

Inspired, Ann followed Karnazes's 'going walkabout' principle and chose a waterfall, 16 kilometres from her home, as her first 'walkabout' destination.

"I started running, but then I got scared – what if I get there and have no energy to come home? I was also concerned about my back because it gets aggravated doing long distances, but it's even worse if I walk."

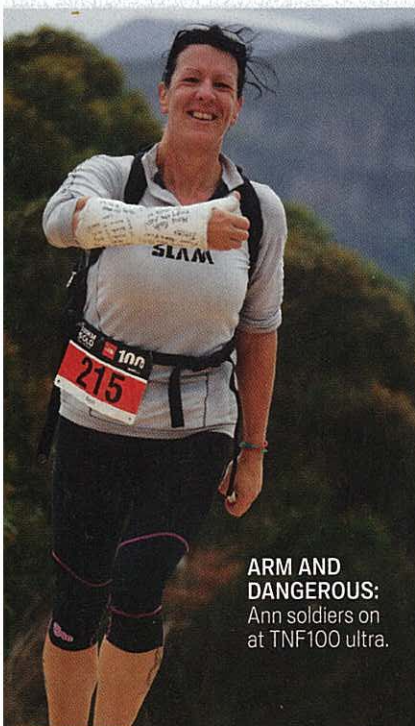
But with her new positive outlook, Ann walked to the waterfall and ran the entire 16 kilometres back.

"That was my first big run. I enjoyed it, but honestly, I didn't like being on the roads that much."

For no other reason than lack of time Ann didn't run for the next couple of months, although she was exercising at the gym regularly. Then, in December, she picked up *Runner's World* and saw an advertisement for The North Face 100 (a 100 kilometre ultra) in the Blue Mountains in May 2009. For five days she studied the ad, thinking about Dean Karnazes' story, remembering being told she would be in a wheelchair for the rest of her life and recalling the pain of learning to walk again.

Life was looking up – new job, new gym, new life. By mid-2008 Ann reached her goal weight of 68 kilograms, but her trainer was keen for her to set goals other than weight loss. So, in September, when Dean Karnazes's book *50 Marathons 50 Days* arrived for review at the newspaper group where she worked as a graphic designer, Ann started reading it and couldn't put it down.

"I'd never heard of anything beyond a marathon before. To me, life had been



ARM AND DANGEROUS:
Ann soldiers on at TNF100 ultra.

TIMELINE

1979 Ann jumps from moving car while drunk. Doctors predict she will be in a wheelchair before she turns 30. ...	to walk again unassisted. ...	Whitsundays and begins cross-training. ...	OCT 2008 Runs 16K by following the Karnazes mantra of using short markers such as posts, trees and letterboxes to keep herself going. ...	JAN 2009 Starts training on local running trails (5 and 10K). ...	25 APR 2009 Completes longest training run (54K). ...
1996 Undergoes surgery: sacro-iliac joint and lower spine fused. Takes six months	MAY 2005 Weight balloons to 120kg. ...	DEC 2007 Starts running as part of a 12-day boot camp. ...	DEC 2008 Sees ad for the TNF 100 in <i>Runners World</i> .	3 APR 2009 First night run (10K) covering rocky terrain. ...	17 MAY 2009 Finishes the TNF 100 in 24 hours, 34 minutes.
	FEB 2007 After losing 30kg, joins gym. ...	SEP 2008 Reads <i>50 Marathons 50 days</i> by Dean Karnazes.		23 APR 2009 Breaks arm at a combat class.	
	SEP 2007 Moves to Conway Beach in the				

MY LITTLE SECRET

At registration the night before race-day, Ann wore a coat and gloves to cover her cast. A friend stood close beside her to hide her hand and help her with her bag during the gear inspection. At least one person saw her arm at registration and was amazed by her courage and determination – it was her inspiration, Dean Karnazes.

"He told me that for my first time I shouldn't have a goal time because things can change. 'Just go and have fun and enjoy the adventure', he said."

On race-day, she exited the first checkpoint much sooner than she had planned, before officials could see her arm. She couldn't hide it from other runners, though.

"Many of the runners offered to help me through the rocks, one guy even lent me his hiking poles on a slippery downhill section," she says.

The beauty of the course amazed Ann,

despite the difficulty she had tackling the steep, rocky terrain one-handed.

"I'd done a ton of stair training, but at Nellie's Glen, some of the steps were waist high – plus it was dark!"

NEVER SAY NEVER

Standing at the 70 kilometre mark of the race, with one arm broken, and one knee bruised and battered, Ann remained determined to continue on. A passing runner helped bandage her knee and a couple not far behind gave her painkillers and kept her company for the remaining 18 kilometres of the leg – most of which was one continuous hill.

"The painkillers only worked briefly, but the company was great. We caught up to others and chatted – it was a really great spirit to be a part of."

With about 14 kilometres remaining, Ann arrived at an SES camp and asked for more painkillers, but they said she'd had too

many and suggested she withdraw from the race. "No", she said. She'd keep walking, even if it took 30 hours to finish.

At the finish line, Ann was astonished to see people cheering and clapping for her as if she had won – and in a way, she had. Trail running helped her overcome all the limits she'd placed on herself physically, emotionally and socially. Now, she not only felt strong in herself, she felt part of a strong running community.

"I've been to five and 10 kilometre races and it can be very competitive. At this race, everyone was so concerned for others. The amount of information they share, their help, their generosity, it was amazing," says Ann.

"One of the top finishers said to me: 'It's not about the placing or the time, we're all out there working just as hard, and it's the spirit of people backing each other up that counts'. He was right, and I can't wait until the next one." **RW**

