



POSITIVE FEELING

Deanna Blegg has defied medical belief to become Australia's top female adventure racer. But her story is not without both tragedy and fortuity. She tells RW how contracting HIV changed her life.

BY HARRIET EDMUND
PHOTOGRAPHY SCOTT MCNAUGHTON

A FILM OF PERSPIRATION is forming on Deanna Blegg's brow. She's just two kilometres into this year's Baise Outdoor Quest in China and already the humidity is sapping her energy.

The extreme climate will make the next three days of riding, running, paddling and abseiling almost 230 kilometres tough, but Deanna isn't fazed. The 42-year-old is an adventure seeker – always willing to push her body to its limits, no matter what the conditions.

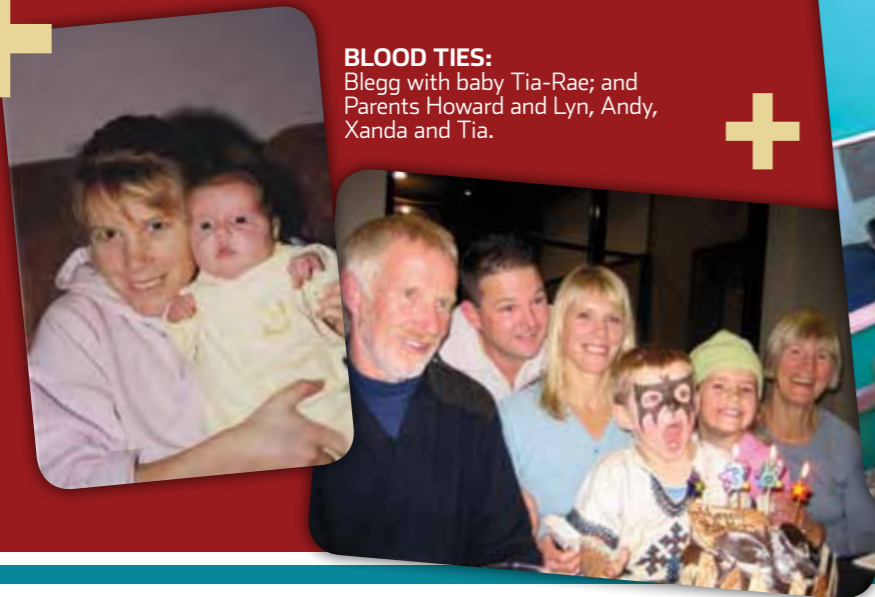
Supporters from the local village of Leye – north of Nanning – spill into the streets, cheering the competitors.

Before venturing into the nearby hills, the peloton of mountain bike riders jostles for position as the pack swirls around the town's outskirts. But the concrete road is coated with a slimy wetness and the rider in front of Deanna crashes out. In a panic to avoid him, Deanna squeezes hard on her brakes causing her thick treads to lose traction. Landing heavily on her left hip, she skids forward on the road.

"I could see she had hurt herself," says team mate Guy Andrews, ironman and adventure racing pro. "But she never complained; she is such a mentally tough person."

AT PEACE:
HIV no longer defines
Deanna Blegg.

BLOOD TIES:
Blegg with baby Tia-Rae; and
Parents Howard and Lyn, Andy,
Xanda and Tia.



EARLY START:
Xanda hits the pool;
and hiking at
Cradle Mountain.

Adrenalin masks most of Deanna's pain, but she stops to check the fall has not broken her skin, causing her HIV infected blood to spill.

GROWING UP IN Victoria's Dandenong Ranges was like spending every day at a fun park for Deanna, her older sister Sharon and younger brother Stuart. They were outdoor kids – always climbing trees, camping and running about the bush. Deanna seldom caught the school bus with her peers, but instead walked the four kilometre round trip every day.

"When it came to sports, I never pushed her," says Lyn, Deanna's mother, "but if there was ever an opportunity she always wanted to compete."

Swimming came first, then aquathon and triathlon, each sport always fitting in around cross country season – running was, and still is, Deanna's strongest suit.

But, as Deanna neared adulthood, Lyn began to worry about the intensity of her daughter's racing. "She wouldn't train hard, but she would always race hard," says the nurse of almost 50 years.

Once Deanna competed so fiercely that she collapsed mid-race and didn't wake up until four hours later with a resting heart-rate of 180, and a body temperature of 42°C.

It was never about winning, but simply giving it her best, which often meant pushing well past the pain barrier. With that attitude Deanna went on to represent Australia as a triathlete at the Commonwealth Games and World Championships twice. At age 17 she was crowned junior world champion and became the 10th placed woman in the world.

But the toll of competing at an elite level finally caught up with her at the 1991 World Triathlon Championships in Florida. The 21-year-old ended the race on an intravenous drip, dehydrated and utterly spent. "That's when mum sat me down and asked, 'What are you doing to yourself?'" Deanna conceded she no longer enjoyed the sport, in fact it was proving detrimental to her health.

SPENDING SIX WEEKS in Honolulu, on her way home from Florida, was just what Deanna needed. She partied at night and relaxed on the beach during the day.

Arriving home rejuvenated, she worked as a garbage collector – perfect for its no frills and physical demands – and took courses in adventure mountain bike riding and white water rafting. "Some people couldn't believe I'd given up triathlons, but I was just

loving running in the bush and discovering recreational sports," she says.

It wasn't long before Deanna booked a one way ticket to London, via Nepal, where she could really put her new skills to the test.

An expedition group of four, including three guys and Deanna, set out to ski the Himalayas, and raft and hike across Nepal. Life couldn't get much better, she thought.

After a self-sufficient five months in the great outdoors, arriving in the hectic city of London was a culture shock. But Deanna soon embraced living with her Australian cousins Naomi and Danielle, and running with her new buddy Ed.

"Running has always been a constant in my life – everything else just merges around it, no matter where I am in the world," she says. And in September 1993, Deanna and Ed entered the Amsterdam Marathon.

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"Running my first marathon was memorable," laughs Deanna. "I weighed 86 kilos after eating a little too well while travelling, but I must have retained some athletic ability." In fact, for the first 20 kilometres, Deanna was leading the entire women's field until the distance got the better of her and she stopped the clock at 3:50. "It wasn't a bad effort," she reflects. "It helped that the Netherlands is flat!"

Little did Deanna know it would be her final race for more than a decade.

ARRIVING IN AFRICA in December 1993 Deanna felt instantly at ease, yet acutely alive amid her worldwide adventure.

She learnt to speak Swahili and made every effort to live as the locals did while travelling Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi.

When a family in Malawi befriended Deanna and invited her to live with them, her life changed forever.

In return for her sleeping mat on the dirt floor of their hut, Deanna would fetch water with the other village women and wash their clothes.

It did not take long for Tigere Chitaukire to catch her eye. "He was a real gentleman, a quality hard to find in a man, black or white," she says.

When the charming local 24-year-old indicated the feelings were mutual, Deanna's travel plans suddenly had a new agenda.

As their relationship blossomed and the pair lay together at night, Tigere suggested they use protection. "Before I left England my doctor told me to take condoms and I laughed because I had no intention of starting a relationship in Africa."

But Deanna was pleased she listened and bought a packet anyway. When they ran out, the couple turned to the local brand. "They didn't reach the same standards as those sold in Australia or England," recalls Deanna. "Many either came from other countries and were damaged in transit or passed their used by date."

One night, about nine weeks into their relationship, a condom broke. Consumed with passion, Deanna thought nothing of it.

It wasn't until two weeks later that fever struck and a rash broke out across her body. The village doctor diagnosed tonsillitis. But in six weeks Deanna lost almost 20 kilos, she could barely eat and began to blackout. Her immune system was shutting down.

The heartache of leaving Tigere and her loving adopted family was unbearable, but Deanna knew to regain her health she must return to England.

JUST HOURS AFTER being admitted to London's Charring Cross Hospital in June 1994, doctors confirmed Deanna had malaria, roundworm and pneumonia. All were curable. But she would have to wait two long weeks for the test results she feared most. "Even though I was tested, I didn't think HIV could happen to me. I was a good person, I came from Australia, I was fit and healthy and I looked after myself," Deanna remembers thinking.

The hospital offered Deanna counselling in anticipation of her results. But nothing could prepare her for the positive diagnosis – especially being told she only had five years to live.

"I was 24 and I had Human Immunodeficiency Virus. I felt as if my body was contaminated," she says.

DEANNA HAD TO see Tigere. The following year, with improved health, she returned to Africa, this time with her cousin Danielle at her side. "I knew he would be devastated, but I had to tell him so he could get help too," says Deanna.

The cousins who, at the same age, were more like sisters were on their way to Malawi when they diverted from their itinerary. They'd heard the sacred caves of Sof Omar in south eastern Ethiopia were not to be missed.

Arriving in the village after dark on 10 June, 1995, the girls found the teahouse filled with visitors, who had been in town for the local market earlier that day. Choosing to stay outside the house

Do you want to feel more connected to your run?

in the cool, fresh air they collapsed into their sleeping bags.

Waking suddenly to the sound of men storming through the village seemed like a nightmare at first. But when Deanna made out the shadows yielding knives and guns were heading straight for them, the reality of their insecurity sunk in.

Diving into their sleeping bags, the girls found a momentary hiding spot. But the bandits – Deanna later discovered at the centre of the country's political and racial unrest following the recent vote for independence – found them.

They ordered the girls to give up their money and backpacks.

"We managed to stuff our passports down our bras and did what they asked," recalls Deanna.

"But they started dragging us away from the village and my cousin was yelling: 'we're going to die, we're going to die'. I told her we'll be alright, but I'd never been so scared in my life."

Deanna thought she saw fire crackers erupt behind them. In fact, it was the Ethiopian Army firing on the bandits.

"Danielle and I dropped to the ground and the bandits fled."

"We're okay, it's okay", I said to my cousin, grabbing her arm and rolling her over."

But a bullet had passed through Danielle's head and another through her chest.

AT HER COUSIN'S memorial service in Australia, Deanna was furious she had been the one to survive the ambush. "After all, I had the death sentence, it should have been me."

Deep remorse consumed her for weeks.

Sharon recalls her younger sister seemed tormented and unsettled. "She had cut her long blonde hair short and dyed it bright red," she says.

Perhaps it was a sign of rebellion or an indication that Deanna was a changed woman.

She had changed, and it was time to tell her family why.

"When Deanna disclosed her status to me I was naïve," says Sharon, who cried at the news. But Deanna was well informed and answered all of her sister's questions.

"I learnt there is a difference between HIV and AIDS," says



COMPANIONS:
Danielle (left) and Deanna in Ethiopia, 1995.

Sharon. "I learnt about her world of medication, blood tests, viral loading, t-cell counts and safe sex."

Telling their parents, Lyn and Howard, was a different matter. "How could she?" Lyn recalls thinking.

"We had told her about HIV and educated all our children about safe sex." But ultimately, they were just relieved Deanna was alive.

THREE TIMES, DEANNA has fought back from an AIDS defining illness. Her immune system so severely attacked that her t-cells, which protect the body from infection, dropped below 200 – about 1000 less than an average count.

In early 1996, Deanna was so ill her eyes, ears, nose and chest became infected, and she lost blood with every visit to the bathroom. Admitted to hospital with Pneumocystis, an AIDS-related pneumonia, she recalls looking down at her frail body, remembering when it was once capable of winning triathlons and running marathons.

Her only chance of surviving was to start HIV antiviral medication, without it doctors said she would not see out the year.

From then on, with only two monitored breaks, Deanna has consumed up to 20 tablets a day – a cocktail of harsh and sometimes toxic HIV treatment, and vitamins to boost her immunity.

The side effects can be brutal: sudden diarrhoea, fatigue, headaches and loss of appetite to list a few.

But Deanna's focus changed when she began the medication. "I started living for the future, rather than from day-to-day," she says. "There's no doubt the medication has kept me alive, it also gave me the chance to have children."

"Of all the people who contract the virus... no one is deserving of it."

BECOMING A MOTHER was something Deanna never thought possible after her diagnosis. But when her HIV specialist suggested with the right precautions the chance of a baby contracting HIV were less than two per cent, Deanna yearned to learn more.

She discovered the medication meant it was highly possible she could naturally conceive without putting her partner at risk. While a natural birth and breast feeding were dangerous, there were safe alternatives – a caesarean section and formula feeding. The baby would receive HIV medication for six weeks after the birth, and be tested regularly in her early years.

As a 28-year-old and in a long-term relationship, Deanna's passion for living was invigorated – the thought of bringing a new life into the world her driving force.

Nine months later, when Deanna held baby Tia-Rae, she whispered to herself, "Now I have to live because my daughter needs her mother."

THE BEST WAY Deanna knew how to stay healthy, was to run. So, when Tia was two, the young mum took up trail running and joined a Melbourne gym. The move paid off:

LIKE A PRO

Adventure racing tips from a world great

1 To be an adventure racer, you need a practiced nutrition plan. For an event up to seven hours I use diluted honey, bananas and a gastrolyte.

2 Fitting in the multi-disciplines can be challenging, especially if you have children and work to consider, but you don't need a structured training program – just train when you can.

3 Recovery is essential. It means rest! Give yourself full days off after a hard training day or race.

4 Keep your vitamins and minerals up. I blend a concoction of raw fruit and veggies with some water every morning.

5 Find some balance. Bikram Yoga helps me focus on my body and soul, while improving my strength and balance. – DEANNA BLEGG

NO EXCUSES:
Deanna trains up to 20 hours a week.



TEAM WORK:
Competing with
sister Sharon, and
celebrating her win.

her t-cells, which had been hovering around 600, shot up to 1400.

Becoming a personal trainer simply formalised her enthusiasm for healthy living. It also meant she could juggle her hours around Tia and share her knowledge of training and racing with others.

Finally in 2005, Deanna picked up where she left off before contracting HIV – with a marathon.

“I helped a client lose 60 kilos to run the Melbourne Marathon and decided to run it with her,” she recalls. “We were elated to cross the line together in 4:55, but it made me think, I’m helping others achieve great things, but what are my goals?”

When Deanna saw a flyer at the gym for the inaugural Anaconda Adventure Race in Lorne, she knew it was just the challenge she needed. “I’m going to win this”, she bravely declared to friends.

Hiring a mountain bike, Deanna soon learnt her best tactic was to fit the disciplines of running, swimming, mountain biking and paddling in when she could – even now; she trains without a coach or structured training program.

“Deanna has a holistic approach to her health and fitness; she does whatever it takes to prepare for the next race, but she is surprisingly free spirited,” says Jan Saunders, Deanna’s training partner.

On the start line of Anaconda 2006, Deanna was ready to test herself once again, except this time she knew her limits. Her body had responded well during training, but racing could be different, and unfortunately Deanna was lacking one important component – race-day fuel.

“I was very green, I’d never trained with gels or fuel, I had no idea



about carbo loading for an event like that and the only hydrating I remembered people doing in my triathlons days was having a beer after the race.”

She finished seventh, but did not give up on her pledge.

DEANNA ONCE THOUGHT having HIV defined her, but when she became an adventure racer and mother of two healthy, HIV negative children – after having Xanda with her new partner Andy – that was no longer the case.

“She became a strong and independent woman,” says Sharon of her sister’s transformation. “She is healthier than most of the general population and in complete tune with her body.”

In September 2007, Deanna’s success helped smash any stigma she felt about her status out of her life forever. She won the Upper Murray Challenge – a 38 kilometre mountain bike ride, 26 kilometre paddle and 25 kilometre run in the foothills of Mt Kosciuszko – a title she’s since claimed three times.

Back at Lorne three months later for her second Anaconda hit out, Deanna had high expectations for the 55 kilometre race. Not only was she racing for herself, but for her cousin Danielle and friend Tigere, who had lost his battle with AIDS.

When she heard Lyn and Howard cheering from the crowd that day, elation welled in her chest. “Hearing mum and dad supporting me, after everything I’d put them through, was very special,” recalls Deanna.

Against a field of predominantly younger women, Deanna won the race in 4:45:01. Brimming with confidence, thoughts of speaking out about her infection began to cross her mind.

For years Deanna says she lived in shame, scared of how people would react if they knew she carried HIV. “Of all the people who contract the virus, no one chooses it,” she says. “Some people put themselves in an environment where they are at a higher risk of catching it, but no one is deserving of it.”

She decided to stay quiet.

But after winning her next race, the five-day Alice Springs MTB Enduro in May 2008, as Deanna thanked the crowd and organisers for their support, she finally spoke of her battle with HIV.

It felt good to tell the people she respected most – her adventure racing peers.

John Jacoby, Rapid Ascent race director, recalls the moment. “It was after the race and there was a hushed response as people were

digesting the news in their own way,” he says. “I think there are probably a few competitors who have questions about Deanna’s status, but they have nothing to worry about.”

Associate professor Margaret Hellard, co-head of the Burnet Institute’s centre for population health, affirms the risk of Deanna passing on the virus during training or competition is extremely slim. “However, in contact sport the rule is that all blood should be treated as infectious – regardless of whether you know or don’t know if the person has a blood borne virus infection.”

She recalls looking down at her frail body, remembering when it was once capable of winning triathlons and running marathons.

AS DEANNA THROWS herself back on her bike in China, she gingerly fingers her carked hip and bruised thigh. Her nicks are scuffed but not torn and she can see there’s no blood. If there was, she would have stopped and doctored the wound herself using her compulsory first aid race kit.

“Being HIV positive means I have to take extra precautions on the course, but I’ve never had a problem,” she says. “I’ve only ever had support from the adventure racing community, and I think there’s now a realisation that people with HIV and other illnesses are competing in our sport.”

After three days of racing for more than six hours a day, the Australians throw their exhausted arms into the air as they cross the finish line in third place.

During the celebrations Guy Andrews declares Deanna one of the best team mates he’s ever raced with. “She’s calm, confident, focused and always aware of how everyone’s feeling around her.”

Guy concludes, Deanna is only ever treated on face value and, after winning numerous sprint and multi-day titles, she’s now considered one of the top adventure racers in the world.

In the end Deanna likens her prospects to Abraham Lincoln’s famous theory: “It’s not about the years in your life that count. It’s the life in your years.” **RW**

For more see runnersworldonline.com.au/video



Living with HIV

While scientists are closing in on a cure, Deanna spreads a message of hope

Scientists are edging closer to finding a cure to HIV, and Australian researchers are leading the way. After recently clearing a HIV-like infection from mice, and discovering how the virus enters resting cells, Melbourne scientists believe a cure is less than 10 years away. However, Deanna Blegg says a medical breakthrough is not on her priority list. “I’ll certainly be celebrating if it happens, but it doesn’t affect how I view my life,” she says.

The 42-year-old works with the Burnett Institute and People Living with HIV/AIDS Victoria to help educate others about the virus.

“She’s not a scaremonger,” says Jan Saunders, Deanna’s training partner, “but she pulls no punches either.”

In 2010, an estimated 21,000 Australians and 3000 New Zealanders were living with HIV. Transmission is most common among homosexuals or bisexuals, followed by injection drug users and heterosexuals, according to a University of New South Wales study.

The immune attacking disease can lead to the early onset of cancer and heart disease, but associate professor Margaret Hellard, of the Burnet Institute, says Deanna has proven regular exercise and a good diet play a role in the health and wellbeing of people with HIV.

