

running in silence

SHE IS THE WORLD'S MOST ACCOMPLISHED DEAF ATHLETE, AND NOW MELINDA VERNON IS TRIUMPHING OVER FIELDS OF ABLE-BODIED RUNNERS ACROSS THE GLOBE. SHE SHARES HER TUSSLE TO THE TOP WITH HARRIET MORLEY.

PACKING A COMBINATION OF HEAVY BLOWS TO THE BOXING BAG AT her family's home in Springwood, NSW, Melinda Vernon's unassuming face glows with perspiration.

The thud of each jab rhythmically echoes in the living room where her parents Carolyn and Jon relax while watching the morning news.

For Melinda, though, each blow is silent.

A self-confessed fighter, Melinda Vernon is profoundly deaf. But don't expect this feisty 23-year-old to say any time soon that she has a disability.

"Being deaf is simply fate, it just makes me more motivated to succeed," says the world record holder for the deaf in the 10,000, 5000, 3000 and 1500 metre events.

And succeed she has. This year alone the tenacious young runner has defeated fields of able-bodied athletes to win some of the most prestigious Australian and New Zealand footraces as she vies for 2010 Commonwealth Games selection.

But her ascendance hasn't come without its blows – some that have literally left Melinda gasping for air.



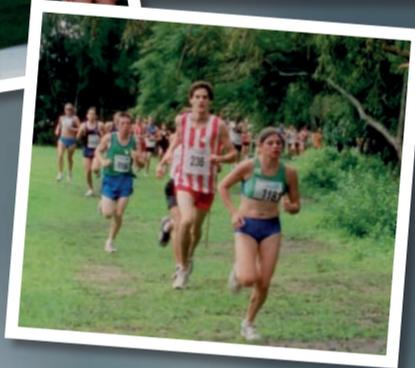
SILENT TREATMENT: Profoundly deaf, Melinda Vernon is left with only her thoughts on the run.



FROM THE GET-GO: (clockwise from top left) Swimming was Melinda's passion after cochlear implant surgery in 1993, but it wasn't long before she stamped her name in the NSW running records.



Images courtesy of Graeme Heape and Carolyn Vernon



FIGHTING FOR FIRST: Looking for a tough edge, Melinda took up boxing this year.



MELINDA WAS JUST NINE MONTHS OLD WHEN SHE WAS given her first hearing aids. Born with a hearing impairment in both ears the aids were intended to help her communicate with others, but they could never allow her to escape the burden of people standing over her and roaring into her ears.

Having a child with a hearing impairment is challenging for any parent, but in true Vernon spirit the young family made a life-time commitment to tackle Melinda's deafness head-on.

"Jon kept the family afloat working long shifts on the trucks, while I taught Melinda how to read and write," recalls Carolyn. "We just wanted her to be treated equally."

Every day mother and daughter spent hours discriminating between sounds and correcting Melinda's broken speech. It briefly paid off with Melinda reaching the reading age of an 11-year-old when she was just five. But regardless of Carolyn's best efforts, Melinda's hearing soon deteriorated, and by first grade she was profoundly deaf.



THE COCHLEAR IMPLANT – A PERMANENT HEARING device designed in Australia – was still in its infancy in 1993, around the same time Melinda was an active six-year-old. And the risks of having the invasive four hour procedure were high: surgeons could easily slice Melinda's facial nerves as they opened her head to insert the implant under her scalp.

"It was a scary time for us, but Jon and I agreed that having the implant meant Melinda could live a normal hearing life," recalls Carolyn.

The implant receives signals from an external speech processor worn above Melinda's right ear. The signals then convert into electrical energy that stimulates nerve fibres in the cochlear, which the brain recognises as sound.

Following successful surgery and with 20 staples in her head, Melinda gave little thought to resting up after the procedure.

"I gave mum the worst month of her life," she recalls. "I was a mischievous and clumsy kid and mum was constantly worried about me falling and hitting my head."

But the prospect of finally being able to hear was all Melinda cared about.

"I remember thinking about how things would change – I could watch TV, listen to music, hear my teacher in the classroom and have conversations with people."

It would take a month for the swelling to subside before Melinda's doctor Professor Bill Gibson at Sydney's Cochlear Implant Centre was ready to turn on her speech processor for the first time.

Nothing could have prepared Melinda for what it would be like to hear for the first time. She cried – not out of joy, but because the noise was so overwhelming.

"When I walked out of the building the microphone on the speech processor amplified the sound of an aeroplane flying overhead and I cried even more," she says. "I told mum and dad that I wished I couldn't hear again and switched my speech processor off."

Carolyn recalls the worry she felt during the first hours of Melinda's hearing life.

"She climbed a tree in the backyard and wouldn't come down," she says.

But in the days to come things settled and, fascinated by the sounds different objects made when she banged on them, Melinda drove everyone crazy.

"Even the banging was literally music to my ears," she laughs.



LIFE WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN FOR MELINDA.

"I ended up with the best of both worlds," she says. "The implant meant I could hear, but I could also turn my speech processor off and experience one of the real joys of being deaf – sleeping in peace."

But as a youngster getting to sleep was always a problem.

"I was such a hyperactive kid, mum had trouble putting me down at bedtime."

A childhood swimmer herself, Carolyn enrolled Melinda in local swimming classes in a bid to expend some of her daughter's abundant energy.

Not only did Melinda's sleeping habits improve, but her athletic ability in the pool proved extraordinary.

"Swimming gave her freedom and a way to let loose," says Carolyn. "But we had no idea what she was capable of."

Following hand gestures and lip reading instructions from her coach, the late Ross Bottle, Melinda soon mastered the art of breaststroke.

"Ross knew everything about breaststroke and helped me reach state finals in the 100 metre breaststroke when I was 12," she says.

But it wasn't swimming that would see Melinda transform from a regional representative to an international champion.



MELINDA SOON REALISED RUNNING COULD BE THE linchpin for her swimming success. It was a way to improve her fitness while attempting to gain a birth in the NSW swim team.

But little did she know Graeme Heape, a local athletics coach, had been watching her run from afar.

"When I first saw Melinda training, I knew she had the ability to take cross country running to a higher level," he says.

"Some people around the [Springwood Athletics] Club thought she was too short to make a good runner (now 160 centimetres), but when I saw her running style I saw something special."

Approaching the Vernons after training one evening, Graeme asked if Melinda would join his squad. When she agreed, he crafted hand-written signs, which read: 'run tall', 'use your arms', and 'never give up'. He hoped the 13-year-old would love the sport as much as he did.

"She smiled when I held up the first sign, I think it surprised her, but she was hooked," recalls Graeme.

While not totally dismissing swimming – later becoming a qualified swim instructor – the following summer, Melinda ran to victory in the state 3000 and 1500 metre events, narrowly missing bronze in the 800 metres.



HOME STRAIGHT: Growing up in the Blue Mountains has its trail running benefits.



IMAGES COURTESY OF GRAEME HEAPE AND MARATHONPHOTOS.COM

ROAD TO RECOVERY: (clockwise from top left) Twelve hour jaw surgery was not enough to stop Melinda winning the Oceania Cross Country Titles and Sydney's City2Surf in 2009.

But running without sound was confronting and at times destructive. Many deaf athletes don't wear their speech processor when they run because the magnetised device can fall off, or malfunction as the body heats up and sweats. So, running in silence left Melinda with only her thoughts.

"When you're going through physical pain, it's easy for negative words to play in your head, which makes it hard to stay focused," she says.

And without the sound of the crowd for motivation and distraction, Melinda would often battle to push negative judgments aside.

Losing balance – a result of hearing loss – also threatened to derail her form. Setting out to improve Melinda's core strength, and ultimately her balance, her coach introduced drills such as running on a straight line, walking on a beam blind-folded, and working with a medicine ball.

The hard work paid off and by the time she reached 17, Melinda's name was etched into the NSW running records, winning almost every state title in her age category.

"Her success was unbelievable," recalls Graeme. "She'd proven to be a very talented athlete, but then her growth pattern just went horribly wrong."



IT STARTED WITH MELINDA PULLING OUT OF RACES. HER immaculate record became marred with DNF [did not finish], and no one knew why.

"It felt as if I was breathing through a straw when I ran," she recalls.

For months Carolyn and Melinda visited a host of physicians, including sleep doctors and respiratory specialists. But even the experts were stumped.

One doctor even suggested that Melinda's illness was in her head, and a ploy to obtain medication.

Now, barely able to run 300 metres, Melinda was feeling desperate and when her dentist suggested she have a jaw x-ray, she immediately thought: 'why not?'

Finally, after almost two years Melinda and her family were handed a diagnosis. The x-ray showed a prognathic jaw and overbite, which had prevented the right side of her jaw from growing as fast as the left. It meant Melinda couldn't open her mouth properly to breathe deeply when she ran.

The jaw defect, potentially related to her deafness, meant the short-term prognosis was not good. It would take four years until the jaw plates had finished growing before she could undergo corrective surgery.

Never one to give up, Graeme adapted Melinda's training into two week blocks of anaerobic running, followed by two weeks of recovery.

"We had to be careful not to damage muscle cells and fibres because of the lack of oxygen intake," he says.

"She did a lot more swimming and bounding drills to keep her quads strong and just tried to race as best she could."

But Melinda was never as competitive as she once was.

LISTEN HERE: Getting a cochlear implant at six gave Melinda a hearing life.



IN APRIL 2007, SURGEONS WERE FINALLY READY TO operate on Melinda's jaw. Breaking her lower jaw on both sides they moved it forward one centimetre, stabilising it with metal plates and screws. Her chin was reconstructed to prevent deformities, and the top jaw also realigned.

As Melinda underwent 12 agonising hours in theatre, her family and coach anxiously awaited news of her condition.

"When she was finally wheeled into the recovery room it was as if she'd been beaten with a baseball bat," recalls Graeme. "Her face was so swollen and I could see such pain in her eyes. Tears streamed down my cheeks."

For three months, Melinda's jaw was wired shut, preventing her from eating; instead she lived on a liquid diet from a feeding tube.

It was now that Melinda wondered what would ever become of her once brilliant running career.



IN THE MONTHS THAT FOLLOWED THE FACIAL SWELLING gradually subsided and, working with a breathing coach, Melinda began her slow road to a full recovery.

"When the oxygen reached the bottom of my lungs again it was such a relief," she recalls.

However, returning to the track three-and-a-half months after surgery, Melinda was emotionally and physically drained, says Graeme. "But the determination she showed to fight back was incredible."

Just four months after the surgery, in August 2007, the 21-year-old found herself at the start line of Sydney's 14 kilometre City2Surf.

With Graeme on the sidelines banging on his chest to signal 'run from the heart', Melinda pulled off the comeback race of her dreams. In 50:37, she finished fourth, just 26 seconds behind third place getter Haley Field.

She had one message for her rivals: "I'm back".



DEFEATING BENITA JOHNSON, AUSTRALIAN CROSS country veteran, the following year, Melinda qualified for the 2008 IAAF World Cross Country Championships in Edinburgh.

She was nervous at the prospect of her first major international competition but knew, too, that if she was to achieve a top 10 finish, as Graeme had predicted, she needed to ditch the nerves – a clean start was vital.

Hearing impaired runners have one major disadvantage over their able-bodied competitors – they can't hear the starter's gun. The result: a slower reaction time off the blocks. To combat this Melinda looks for smoke from the starter's gun or movement from her competitors at the start line.

Today, however, there would be no smoke.

With a cameraman vying for the perfect pre-race photograph Melinda's view of the starter's gun was obstructed.

"Before I knew it the gun had gone and the runners took off. I was confused and raced away like a 400 metre sprinter."

Bashing out a sub-three-minute first kilometre, Melinda caught up to the main pack quickly, but soon faded.

Finishing 41st in 27:23, Melinda's debutant performance wasn't her finest hour, but it was good enough to help the Australian women's team to bronze.



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EDINBURGH WOULDN'T BE THE ONLY TIME MELINDA would face unexpected race-day setbacks.

Entering the realms of Australia's elite female running throng, her competitors began to snaffle any advantage they could get over Melinda.

"Some girls will hide behind me during a race because they know I can't hear them, and then explode past me to the finish line," she says. "If the weather's good I can see their shadow on the ground beside me, and other times Graeme holds up signs to alert me to their presence."

Authorised by race directors to use sign language and written queues, Graeme has mastered a host of cryptic signals, which miff Melinda's competitors.

Her training partner Marnie Ponton, a steeplechase specialist, says Melinda can take direction simply from Graeme's body language.

"They practice all sorts of tricks at training. You have to communicate somehow during a race, and that's what works for them," she says.



RETURNING ONE YEAR LATER TO RUN THE 2009 IAAF World Cross Country Championships, this time in Amman, Jordan, Melinda was ready to spar with the world's best athletes.

But like many that day, the course surface had Melinda stumped.

Held at the Bisharat Golf Course she wore plastic plated track spikes expecting soft grass, but the rock hard dirt trails took its toll, leaving her with a painful heel injury, retrocalcaneal bursitis, and a disappointing time of 29:04.

Thankfully a speedy recovery had Melinda fired up to make amends, and she smashed her 10 kilometre PB by five seconds at the NSW Road Championships to win the title in 33:54 – just 34 seconds shy of Commonwealth Games qualification.

With a ferocious new outlook, Melinda locked her eyes on the Sydney Morning Herald half marathon prize – the inaugural Kerryn McCann Trophy.

Winning the race in a PB of 75:26, she mounted the winner's dais and told the crowd how honoured she was to hold a trophy dedicated the dual Commonwealth Games marathon gold medallist.

"I idolised Kerryn when I was growing up, and to win for her is something I'll never forget."

By August, Melinda took her assault off-shore, winning the Oceania Titles at the New Zealand Cross Country Championships in Christchurch.

"She's such a level-headed person. Even after her success this year, she just keeps her head down and works hard," says Marnie. "She's in the form of her life and it's only going to get better."

Marnie was right – racing against a record 75,000 runners' on 16



TEAMING UP: Melinda and longtime coach Graeme Heape master messages to miff her competitors.

asking for answers

LIFE-TIME LOVE: Melinda with her mother Carolyn.



LIKE 25 PER CENT OF DEAF

Australians, Melinda doesn't know what caused her hearing loss.

With no known family history of deafness Carolyn, Melinda's mother, questions her former employer, a Parramatta telecommunications company, over fumigating the office building where she worked.

"I was in my first trimester with Melinda when the building was fumigated without warning," she recalls.

"But in those days [1985] nothing was said about the potential risks."

The company investigated the suspicion, but a spokesperson says it was not aware of the fumigation.

"With that being said, it is something we take seriously," he says.

Even today, Worksafe Australia tells *RW* there are no specific regulations in place for the control of chemicals, known as ototoxins, in the workplace that may cause hearing loss. But launching a review in 2008, Worksafe Australia will determine whether national safety regulations should be introduced.

In Melinda's case, she was seven-months-old when medical tests confirmed

she was hard of hearing.

Common causes such as exposure to meningitis, measles and mumps during the pregnancy or medications taken like antibiotic gentamicin were all ruled out.

It wasn't until 16 years later that Carolyn began to suspect the fumigation may have been to blame.

"When Melinda was young I didn't have a lot of time to pursue it because I dedicated myself to her learning so she could go to a regular school," says Carolyn.

Melinda's ear doctor Professor Bill Gibson, of the Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre, says there's no real way of knowing if the fumigation caused Melinda's hearing loss, but says a new test could discard a genetic cause.

"There are 400 genes that can cause deafness, and we can now test for the 20 most common," he says. "But if the hearing loss is due to one of the more rare genes, there is no way of knowing for sure."

Melinda will take the blood test in the off-season and says: "It will be good to finally narrow down the possible cause, especially as I have hearing parents and two hearing sisters."

August, Melinda claimed the female title of the 2009 City2Surf in 47:46.

As Graeme popped the champagne cork after the race, Melinda rejoiced.

"I've always wanted to win the City2Surf. I've had a dream to do that since I was a little kid watching it on the television. Now it's come true."



MELINDA'S NOW CONSIDERED THE WORLD CHAMPION DEAF ATHLETE after winning the 10,000 and 5000 metres at the Taipei Deaflympics in September. Plus, Tim O'Shaughnessy, Athletics Australia national distance event coordinator, touts her as one of the country's top female distance runners.

"Melinda's in career best form and adds depth to our cross country teams. She's also a very good track runner and will be a strong contender for the 10,000 metres in the Delhi 2010 Commonwealth Games," he says.

But there's still some toughening up to do, according to Melinda.

"While some people say I've had more allowances in life because I am deaf, I've learnt not to worry about what people think because it can affect your performance," she says.

"It's not the hearing loss that limits you; it's being hard on yourself. It's about forgetting all the disadvantages and challenges deafness may impose and focusing on the positives."

For more information about hearing loss visit hearing.com.au or deaf.co.nz. **RW**



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