

DAN CUDMORE /

Straight from the Heart

Dan lacing up his shoes ahead of an early morning training run.

Many runners think being fit and active is the right thing to do for their health; but for some, the opposite is true. LISA SCHOFIELD talks to Dan Cudmore as he tells us how he outran death – without even knowing they were racing.

IMAGES | DAN CUDMORE, EDDIE MORTON & MARATHON-PHOTOS.COM

Sometimes you're lucky enough to meet people who fill their lives with adventure; who get knocked down and get straight back up, and who teach us lessons. Dan Cudmore (66), from Melbourne, is one of these people. Dan's story is so interesting that it could almost be out of a *Boy's Own Annual*, and his message so important that it simply can't be ignored.

Happily settled in Melbourne with partner Lin, and now working as a marketing manager in agro-business, Dan has led a rich and active life. A Vietnam veteran, an ocean racer, a cyclist, a marathon runner, a pilot, a hot-air balloonist, a sky diver, an adventurer – Dan has done more challenges than most people could ever imagine.

Since the 1980s, Dan has been active in the ocean-sailing world, and has sailed in 10 Sydney to Hobart races, been a crew-member in a Clipper Round the World race, sailed twice to Antarctica, and won the only Around Australia Bi-Centenary Race.

And while Dan may have saltwater in his veins, it hasn't stopped his land-based adventures.

But Dan faced one of his biggest challenges recently when an unusually slow and tough marathon, followed by a difficult post-race recovery, forced him to take a visit to his doctor. Tests revealed Dan's arteries were severely blocked, and he realised he'd run that marathon with death sitting on his shoulder. Although fit, active and healthy, with none of the other contributing factors for heart disease, hereditary cholesterol put Dan in the high-risk category and showed him why heart disease is often called a silent killer – he had no idea he even had it.

CORONARY HEART DISEASE IS THE MOST common cause of death in Australia and is responsible for nearly 22,000 deaths each year, or one death every 24 minutes. Cardiovascular disease (heart, stroke and blood-vessel diseases) affects around 1.4 million Australians and claims the lives of 59 Australians each day. It is estimated over 380,000 Australians have had a heart attack at some time in their lives, with coronary heart disease normally the underlying

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As a member of an informal UK-based group of cycling friends self-proclaimed as “The Fat Boys”, Dan has regularly headed overseas with his bike to meet up for cycle trips. Together they have cycled all around the world; they have followed Hannibal's Trail and cycled Transylvania, the West Coast of Scotland and the Outer Hebrides. Their only rule is they can't cycle past a pub without stopping, which, in the UK and Scotland, with their vast network of pubs, can make for some interesting cycling trips.

If there is an adventure and challenge on offer, Dan has always been up for it.

cause. Some people may not know they have heart disease until they have a heart attack.

Yet many runners don't encounter the traditional contributing factors to heart disease. We keep fit and active, we're not sedentary, and many of us don't smoke nor are overweight. We may think we are “fine” because we run and keep healthy, as was the case with Dan. In fact, his “fine” meant he lived life louder than most, and this almost caught up to him as he got older and started to run seriously.

A SELF-CONFESSED “PLODDER RATHER THAN A sprinter”, Dan has always run – from cross-country races to charity fun runs. But he only started to get serious about running 15 years ago when he took on his first “long-distance run”. For most, this might mean a half or full marathon, but for Dan it was a run from the west coast to the east coast of the United Kingdom – a distance of over 220km.

This was his introduction to marathon running, and before long he started signing up for local marathons. But when Dan caught wind of the six World Marathon Majors (New York, London, Boston, Tokyo, Berlin and Chicago), the challenge and adventure was too big for him to ignore.

The first cab off the rank was a deeply personal one. With Dan having spent time teaching sailing and swimming in 2001 in nearby Cape Cod, the city of Boston quickly became a favourite. And while having a chat with his friend Geoff Knox, who fought with Dan in Vietnam but was by then in his final stages of terminal cancer, Geoff told Dan his goal had always been to run the Boston Marathon, a race often regarded as one of the greatest marathons in the world. In typical fashion, Dan said, “We'll run it. You can run it in

spirit with me”. Sadly, Geoff died five days later.

Not one to give up on a challenge or a promise, Dan qualified for Boston by running a sub 4-hour marathon on the Gold Coast. He then ran the Boston Marathon in 2010 in 3hr 50min, “chatting” to Geoff in spirit all the way. When he finished and had received his finisher's medal, Dan realised that he hadn't picked up a medal for Geoff. After asking officials for an extra one and being told no, Dan did what any person on a mission would do; he tucked his own medal in his shorts pocket, walked to the end of the race, and ran back through the finishing tunnel to pick up a second medal that he could take back to Australia for Geoff's widow.

But running for Dan started to form a different kind of challenge when, in 2011, he ran the Melbourne Marathon and eventually finished in 4hr 52min, over an hour slower than his finishing time in Boston.

“I was really struggling”, he recalls. “In the end, I shuffled over the finish line and felt dreadful. I did the normal post-race celebrations but felt there was something wrong.” Even more sobering, as Dan and Lin walked away from the race, they saw a man lying on the ground, face down, not moving. They went over and found he had very little pulse and had suffered a heart attack. They started basic CPR and called for the St John's Ambulance.

“It really brought the message home hard and motivated me to get myself checked out”, Dan says. “I had this man's image in my mind.”

Within four weeks, Dan saw a specialist who discovered that Dan's arteries were 80 per cent blocked and that he needed a double heart bypass. Dan was stunned. “How could I have not realised this?” he recalls asking his doctor. “I've just run a marathon.”



Dan down on the Antarctic Peninsula with his yacht “The Blizzard” in 2008.



Dan (R) about to take off in the Aerochute Werrabee in 2011.



A Romanian bike ride with the “Fat Boys” in 2006.

"I hadn't been feeling any particular signs", says Dan, reflecting further on the diagnosis. "Training was a little harder, and the hills a little tougher, but that was it. I felt completely normal otherwise."

It has since become a personal crusade for Dan to share his doctor's reply: "You can have 75 per cent blockages in your heart arteries and not even know it. If you then go and do high levels of exercise, you're in real trouble."

A few months later, Dan underwent a double bypass operation and started a slow recovery. "I'd mislead myself," he recalls. "I had this image that with my two new arteries, I'd be bionic again. Forget it – it doesn't work that way."

One year on, Dan is slowly regaining his fitness, has dusted off his running shoes and has already run in his first half marathon, albeit a lot more gently than normal.

But as anyone who is used to a certain level of fitness will understand, Dan is his own worst enemy, and on a recent run, he started experiencing chest and arm pains. An urgent trip back to his doctor resulted in a stern talking to, as his doctor told him he was overdoing it. And as Dan had been running 50-60km and swimming 3km per week, the doctor may have had a point. "I'm pulling it back now and not worrying about my time," says Dan. "Rather, I'm just running for the joy of it."

With his father having died at a young age as a result of high cholesterol, and given his own minor cholesterol-induced stroke in his 40s and most recent scare, Dan has worked hard to get his cholesterol down to a very low level. "I'm also very mindful of my diet now," he explains. "I'd suggest to anyone wanting to undertake serious training, make sure you include addressing your diet in your overall plan."

THE HEART FOUNDATION STRESSES THAT FAMILY history plays a key role in determining your risk of heart disease. If one parent has a heart attack or is diagnosed with heart disease before they're 55, your chance of having a heart attack increases by 40 per cent; if both parents have had an early heart attack, your risk is even higher.

Heart Foundation's National Director of Cardiovascular Health, Dr Robert Grenfell, advises the only way to know your true heart health is to get checked by your GP.

"Your GP will look at blood pressure, cholesterol, weight, gender and discuss risk factors like family history, smoking status and age, and calculate your likelihood of having a heart attack in the next five years," he explains. "Everyone 45 and over, or 35 and over if you are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, should have a heart health check every year by their doctor. If you have a family history of heart disease, high blood pressure or high cholesterol, you should see your doctor earlier."

"Many people think that heart disease is an old man's disease, but the fact is heart disease doesn't discriminate; it affects all ages, men and women."



Dan slugs it out past Flinders Street Station in the 2011 Melbourne Marathon.



Rolling along the streets of Surfers' Paradise during the 2009 Gold Coast Airport Marathon.

DAN'S EXPERIENCE WITH heart disease hasn't stopped him lining up his running goals; he has already registered for both the Berlin Marathon in September and the Melbourne Marathon in October 2013 – all with his doctor's approval and Dan's commitment to working closely with him through his recovery.

"I've always been good at listening to my body, and this has been a wakeup,"

says Dan. "I don't have the same bravado I used to have. Now I tend to pull back that extra five per cent and take things a little easier."

Yet not that easy, as back in Dan's sightline is his "bucket list, and it will come as no surprise that included on his list of life must-dos are plans to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, walk Kokoda and complete the big six marathons, with the New York Marathon his next target after Berlin.

When Dan looks back on his experiences with heart disease, he feels lucky that he was able to pick up his condition, resolve it, and move on. "I'm not one to dwell," he says. "I've had experiences that I don't need to reflect on. I'm not a fatalist – you make your own luck." But even he acknowledges he's been "lucky" on more than one occasion over the years.

Dan Cudmore has packed more into his life than most. "Life rolls on and you grab what you can when you can," he says. And Dan has grabbed plenty. But at the same time, he has had physical challenges to overcome, and as a result, his message is powerful: "Make sure you watch your diet and your cholesterol, keep fit and active and, as you get older, work with your doctor on identifying and eliminating the risks of heart disease. Remember – your arteries can be 75 per cent blocked and you don't even know it."

That's why we need to remember that heart disease is a silent killer, and that we may be at risk without knowing it. And this is one lesson that Dan has taught us because he's been lucky enough to live to teach it. Many aren't.

HEART DISEASE RISK FACTORS

Risk factors that can be changed through diet and exercise

- Smoking
 - High blood cholesterol
 - High blood pressure
 - Diabetes
 - Physical inactivity
 - Overweight
 - Depression and social isolation
- Risk factors that can't be changed:
- Increasing age
 - Family history of coronary heart disease

SYMPTOMS OF A HEART ATTACK

Warning signs can vary and may not always be sudden or severe. Although chest pain or discomfort is the most common symptom of a heart attack, some people will not experience chest pain at all, while others will experience only mild chest pain or discomfort. Others may experience one symptom, while some experience a combination. The one thing all heart attacks have in common is that the sooner you receive treatment, the less damage will be done.

Symptoms may include pain pressure, heaviness or tightness in your chest, shoulders, neck and/or arms. You may also feel nausea, dizziness, cold sweats and/or shortness of breath.

If you think you could be having a heart attack, call Triple Zero (000) immediately or seek urgent medical attention. Because the longer you wait, the more your heart muscle dies.

The Heart Foundation is urging all Australians to learn the warning signs of heart attack and download a free action plan at www.heartattackfacts.org.au or call the Heart Foundation's Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87.

SURVIVING A HEART ATTACK

For heart attack survivors, there is a small window of opportunity to minimise heart damage. Ideally, the best result is achieved when people receive emergency treatment within 90 minutes of their first symptom. After two hours, the damage to the heart muscle may be irreversible and can cause permanent disability.

Performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation can help save a life. The Heart Foundation recommends that every adult and teenager learn this lifesaving skill, and they provide a range of CPR resources, including a CPR – Saving Lives booklet, a CPR poster and CPR wallet card. To order, go to www.heartfoundation.org.au or call 1300 36 27 87.

If you are at risk of heart disease, consult your health professional before undertaking any exercise program.