



**TRAINING HIGH**  
Carrying packs filled with rice is all in a day's training.

WHEN LIFE'S TWISTS AND TURNS DEALT CHERIE HORNE TWO DEVASTATING BLOWS, SHE DREW UPON THE STRENGTH AND GRITTIENESS SHE'D LEARNED FROM RUNNING TO BATTLE ON.  
BY LISA HOLMES

## Climbing New Heights

TWO AND A HALF YEARS AGO, AT MINUS 15 DEGREES IN AN EXPEDITION tent on Everest's base camp, Cherie Horne woke from a nightmare. Or was it? She knew altitude could make you have strange dreams, but this seemed so real. It was her father. He was unwell. And then he died. Just then, the satellite phone rang.

### GREAT AMBITIONS

As a teen, Cherie was tipped to be the next big thing to emerge from junior athletics in Australia. Raised in the Victorian Dandenong Ranges, in the small town of Menzies Creek, Cherie was a happy, quietly determined young girl who, by the age of 12, knew exactly what she wanted to do with her life.

To become a runner.

"It was pretty funny," she smiles. "I remember asking Mum to take me to a dietitian to find out what I have to eat to get to the Olympics."

But now Cherie wasn't 12, she was 28, and this wasn't Menzies Creek. She was listening to her Dad on the end of the satellite phone. His voice was different, he was confusing her. "You have a what? A brain tumour?" Then Cherie remembered her nightmare.

### FAMILY TIES

Cherie had lived with her Dad since her parents separated when she was 12. Her Dad, Tony, proudly supported his daughter's quest for Olympic gold. "Dad would follow me in the car when I went running before school at 5am," recalls Cherie. "He is the biggest inspiration in my life."

After receiving Tony's news, Cherie returned home immediately to be by her father's side as he underwent surgery. Sitting in the waiting room Cherie's thoughts drifted to times when things had been different, when it was Tony waiting for her.

### UNEXPECTED TURNS

In 1999, aged 24, Cherie was on track to make Australia's Olympic team for the 10,000 metres. "Everything was looking good, I'd won some junior titles and was preparing for selections," recalls Cherie.

Though Cherie had been frustrated by a spate of niggling hip and knee injuries, she was shocked to learn on a visit to her surgeon that unless she stopped running immediately she was headed for major hip surgery before she turned 30. She had softening in the cartilage, a result of

overuse at a young age. Quite simply, while her mind was as enthusiastic as ever to make running her life, her body was saying no.

Cherie was shattered. Not making the Olympics had never been part of her plan, let alone a life without running. "Dad took me straight home and I cried for hours, it felt like my world had fallen apart," she recalls.

### THE AFTERMATH

"When running's your life and it's all you know, it becomes your identity, and you don't know how to live without it," explains Cherie.

A tough couple of years followed. Cherie suffered depression, and while an extremely personal and confronting time, she gradually began rebuilding her life with the support of family and a network of medical professionals.

"At one stage I even took up golf," she laughs. "I thought if I couldn't be the best runner, I'd be the best golfer. That really didn't last."

It was all part of the healing process, which also included returning to study, working as a hospital theatre technician and joining her local bushwalking club. If she couldn't run, at least she could maintain some fitness through walking.

### A LIFE CHANGE

While surgeons successfully removed the tumour from Tony's brain, the news wasn't good. He had an aggressive form of cancer. It was terminal.

Though devastated, Cherie knew immediately what she had to do.

"I gave up my job and became Dad's primary carer. Dad means so much to me. I didn't know how long I had left with him so I wanted to give him all the time I could," she says.

Around this time, Cherie started running again. While it took some time to adjust to just 'having a run' and not worrying about clocking PB's, it felt good, damn good. Her body seemed to accept the more pedestrian approach to exercise without too much complaint. "Running became my coping mechanism, a time to re-energise, to cope with Dad's situation, to give me the strength to help him through his next bout of chemo or yet another operation."

### TAKING IT TO THE MOUNTAINS

Cherie's trip to base camp had not only inspired her, but stirred something within. "I loved the freedom and spiritual connection I felt at the mountains," she recalls.

She became captivated by another goal. Cherie set her sights on ascending the Seven Summits (the highest peak on each continent) and be the first Australian-born female to accomplish the feat.

Her goal provided a valuable release from the relentless mental challenges that arise when your life is affected by cancer.

Carrying packs filled with 20 kilograms of rice, Cherie traipsed her local parks, hills, stairs, anywhere that was up, to prepare. "When I climb these mountains I'm carrying 20 odd kilos so that's what I need to do for training," she explains.

Her first mountain climb was on home soil, Australia's Mt Kosciuszko (towering 2228 metres above sea level) in August 2006. Conquering that, Cherie made her way to Russia's highest peak, Mount Elbrus (5642 metres), two months later. After another successful summit, she headed to Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro (5895 metres).

### FACING HER DEMONS

It has been more than two years since Cherie's father was diagnosed. "We don't know how long Dad has left with us but you never know, he's pretty tough and a real fighter."

And so is his daughter.

So tough in fact that Cherie decided to return to running, entering the Melbourne half marathon. "I wanted Dad to see me run one last time."

Too ill to cope with noise and crowds, Tony was unable to see his little girl cross the finish line on the hallowed MCG. But he waited by the entrance of the stadium and as she ran past him she spotted a light



**RUNNING AGAIN:**  
Cherie's passion for running never wavered.

in his eye that reminded her of when she was a 12-year-old girl. "That moment will be with me forever."

### DARING TO DREAM

As Cherie prepares to attempt her fourth peak next month, South America's Mount Aconcagua (6962 metres), she admits she hesitated before making her final payment. "Dad's been pretty bad so I wasn't sure if I should go, but he said, 'you have to go, I want you to follow your dreams'."

You get the feeling that this young woman will do just that no matter how tough things get. "Dad's taught me that life's about challenging yourself, climbing your own mountains, no matter how big," says Cherie.

"It doesn't matter if you want to be the best Mum or if you want to run a 5K, as long as you have a goal that's worthy of you and that you believe in, then that's what life's all about.

"Life's short you've got to say 'okay, I'll give this a crack'."