

AAP News Story – Doubting Thomas

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By JANELLE MILES – National Medical Correspondent

CONQUERING the world's highest sporting peaks is no protection against life's lowest lows. Just ask Petria Thomas. Thomas, who won three gold medals in her Olympic swansong in Athens, chronicles a three-year struggle with depression and her journey to contentment in her biography *Swimming Against the Tide*.

The 29-year-old finished her career as one of Australia's greatest Olympians, equalling Dawn Fraser and Susie O'Neill with eight Olympic medals. Her dogged battle to the top of the Olympic podium after three shoulder reconstructions earned her the nickname "the bionic butterfly" and the respect of many in and out of the sporting arena. Before her first reconstruction, no swimmer had ever been able to make a successful comeback from similar surgery, let alone three such operations.

Underneath her wings of steel, however, was a vulnerability not unlike what millions of Australians will suffer at some stage in their lives. On the blocks, waiting for the starter's gun, a whiff of chlorine and anticipation in the air, Thomas felt relatively in control. No matter that her every move was being watched by thousands, sometimes millions. In the pool competing, she was in her comfort zone. But things were not as easy on dry land.

"People often ask me how I always appeared so confident when I was racing. Most of the time I was, because it's what I trained for," Thomas said. "That's what I was good at and I know I'm a good swimmer. But when it came to other parts of my life, I wasn't anywhere near as confident. In terms of going to a party or a social situation I've never been entirely comfortable with that and I probably never will be. I just don't have that social confidence that some people have."

A recently released book chronicles how low she became during her early years at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in Canberra. She'd moved there in early 1993 from a happy childhood at Mullumbimby, on the New South Wales coast, to pursue her Olympic dream.

Within 18 months, and just three months before her first major gold medal win over Susie O'Neill in the 100m butterfly at the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Canada, she'd taken an overdose of paracetamol tablets on an empty stomach and had to be hospitalised. Less than a year later she was admitted to the psychiatric unit at Canberra's Woden Valley Hospital for a week to stop her from trying to harm herself again. And days before winning her first Olympic medal, a silver behind O'Neill in the 200m butterfly at the 1996 Atlanta Games, she wrote

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in her diary about having thoughts of grabbing a knife to punish herself for feeling so "useless".

At one stage, just months before the selection trials for Atlanta, Australian head swimming coach Don Talbot told her then AIS coach Jim Fowlie "Petria had to go". Only a phone call to Talbot by sports psychologist Clark Perry, who guided Thomas through her darkest days, saved her career.

Fowlie admits he struggled to deal with and accept Thomas' depression, unable to comprehend how someone with such talent could be so down on herself. But Thomas says it's ridiculous to think sports stars are immune from depression.

"It's a big problem in life and sport is no different to life," she said. "People forget that athletes are just normal people. They have the same ups and downs as everyone else in their life. It would be silly to think that there would be no sports people that haven't gone through rough times in their life because everyone does. Some people worse than others. It's just a fact of life."

Psychiatrist Gordon Parker, Executive Director of Sydney's Black Dog Institute which researches mood disorders, says he's treated many sports stars for depression, some during their careers, some afterwards.

"There are some competing at the moment on quite high doses of anti-depressants and mood stabilisers having no negative impact on their sporting success," Professor Parker said.

"I've seen many and across many sports at the highest level. Some are household names. So far I haven't had anyone who's had any side effects affecting their performance despite all of us being concerned about that possibility. That's been a great relief."

The reasons for their depression are complex and not often just related to the pressures of being a sports hero. For the painfully shy Thomas, genetics and social conditioning may have played some role -- her biography speculating her father Alan may have passed on some of his low self-esteem to his daughter. Like many young women in their late teens and early 20s, Thomas didn't feel comfortable in her own skin.

"For a long time -- a long, long time in fact -- I had a very poor image of the way I looked," she writes in the book. "Sure, I had to be fit and strong to swim. But socially, my body didn't fit. I'm not a glamour woman. I wasn't striking. I didn't stand out and I felt pretty plain and ordinary. I never thought I'd find a guy who'd be interested in me."

Possibly her biggest message in the book is that the dark times don't last. With therapy, anti-depressant medication and help from friends and staff at the AIS,

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Thomas moved through her despair to not only stand atop sport's Mt Everest but become, in Perry's words, "a champion in life".

Mental health experts like Parker believe decisions like the one Thomas made to go public with their depression can only help destigmatise the illness.

For Thomas, now married and planning to have a family with husband Julian Jones, opening up to author Andy Shea about her depression was not easy. But her purpose, to hopefully help others get through the challenges in their lives, has already been achieved.

"I've had a few people come up to me and said it's changed their life already," she said. "That's probably the greatest gift that you could ask for. That's really special and that was the whole point of it."

With her swimming career now over, Thomas is contemplating setting up a charity combining the treatment of depression with the rehabilitation of lost and abandoned animals.

"I'm passionate about animals," she said. "I have a strong suspicion that they can be used to help people through depression by virtue of their companionship, loyalty and warmth."

Those having problems with depression can find information at www.blackdoginstitute.org.au which has a section on assisting people to get help.

Swimming Against the Tide by Andy Shea - ABC Books, \$32.95

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