

# Fighting off the Black Dog

## Olympic legend tells of his struggle with depression

By Isobel Coleman

TO the outside world, John Konrads had it all – an Olympic swimming champion in his teens, a superstar who'd once held all the men's freestyle world records from 200m to 1500m, MD of an international company by 30.

His swimming opened doors. Konrads was showered with invitations to dinner parties, glitterati events, TV chat shows. Kerry Packer was a drinking mate.

But, as time went by, John realised something was wrong.

"I didn't understand what was happening but I knew I wasn't right," John told *The Noosa Journal*.

"I don't think I was depressed while I was swimming, but later in life I started having what I called the springtime blues. I just couldn't cope and would find myself staring at a piece of paper for an hour."

At the age of 59, John was finally diagnosed with Bipolar II.

"It was ironic, really. I was already on the board of the Black Dog Institute, an anti-depression unit headed by psychiatrist Professor Gordon Parker," John said.

Now a spokesman for Black Dog, John, who moved to Sunrise Beach from Sydney in January this year,



**KEEPING ACTIVE:** John Konrads, spokesman for the Black Dog Institute, and (inset) swimming legends Ilsa Konrads and her brother John with a youthful-looking coach Don Talbot (centre) in 1958.

said that moment, back in 2002, was a major turning point.

"There are two milestones when dealing with clinical depression or Bipolar, and you can't really move forward until you pass them," John said.

"The first is getting diagnosed – that's a massive relief. Up until then you think it's all your fault, and then you get told it's not.

"The second milestone is being prescribed the right medication – and taking it."

John fears many men his age are needlessly suffering depression because of people's attitudes.

"Those who grew up in the '50s and '60s were told not to whinge, to pull your act together and get on with it," he said.

### GET INVOLVED

- During Exercise Your Mood Week, Black Dog is urging Coast residents to get off the couch and get involved.
- Schools are encouraged to organise an event, such as a cross-country run or a walk-athon, while businesses and community are being asked to enter teams in an organised event or alternatively to start their own.
- A full list of ideas and events can be found on the Black Dog website, at [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au).

Still highly active at 68, John said appearances can be deceptive when dealing with depression.

"When I was the life and soul of the party, then people thought all was well, but that is part of being bipolar," he said.

Nowadays John uses exercise to battle his condition, and is fully supporting Black Dog's Exercise Your Mood Week, September 11-19.

"It's been proven that physical exercise plays a crucial role in controlling mood and depression," he said.