



Sink or swim

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Byline: Story by Janet Hawley

In his teens, he was an idolised Olympic champion; at 30, MD of an international company. But if outwardly John Konrads' life looked happy and carefree, on the inside, it was a different story.

Two years ago, a group of high-profile people were having drinks after a committee meeting. They were part of a group that helps the Black Dog Institute, the NSW government's anti-depression unit, headed by psychiatrist Professor Gordon Parker. Parker was there that night, and as he glanced around the room, he noticed one of the committee members, the legendary Olympic swimmer John Konrads, standing alone at the back of the room.

Like the rest of the nation, Parker had observed John and Ilsa Konrads' blazing trajectory of fame from 1958 to 1964, when brother and sister had been the objects of public adulation and saturation media coverage. He also knew something of John's career since, and assumed it had been successful.

But on this night, Konrads' face and body were sagging, his eyes staring vacantly into his drink. He'd barely managed a monosyllabic conversation with the other celebrity guests, and when he spoke, all tone had gone out of his voice. Parker, who had already been starting to worry about changes he'd noticed in Konrads' behaviour, gently took him aside.

Konrads today recalls: "He told me that the light had gone out of my eyes, I was probably suffering depression, and needed to get some help. It was almost a relief that someone had finally said this to me. I realised that my 'big boys don't cry' front was no longer working, and I couldn't hide the gut-ripping despair inside me."

The rescue of John Konrads - the superstar who'd once held all the men's freestyle world records from 200 to 1500 metres, but was now on a precarious, destructive slide - had begun.

It's a story the 61-year-old wants to share, because he feels it could help others suffering from untreated depression "that creeps up on you" (he was diagnosed with bipolar II disorder - see box on page 20). He explains: "Depression is so unreasonable, you can't use logic, you feel so black and negative that you have no self-awareness of your own condition. You become your own worst enemy, forcing yourself to plod on, and often it needs someone else to take the initiative to get help.

"The biggest relief is to learn that it's not your fault, and that a combination of medication, talking therapy, exercise and meditation can turn it around. When I started to feel well again, it was scary to look back and see what a pitiful state I'd reached."

In January 1958, a 13-year-old girl called Ilsa Konrads stunned the nation when she broke two women's freestyle world records. Two weeks later, her brother John, 15, broke two men's freestyle world records.

Australia immediately fell in love with the Konrads kids, and the media attention continued for the next six years, as Ilsa set 12 individual world records and John 24.

Speaking from his Brisbane home, their former coach, Don Talbot, says: "John and Ilsa were absolutely fawned on, doted on by everyone they encountered. If you think it's tough what Thorpie has to face up to today, it was twice as bad for the Konrads kids back then, and they had no professional back-up."

John admits: "I loved the publicity and attention, revelled in it, but Ilsa was a more shy, private person, who felt uncomfortable with media scrutiny, and then absolutely hated it." (Ilsa quit swimming forever at 19, and beat the enemy by joining their ranks, becoming a journalist and going on to edit Vogue Living and Belle magazines. She now works as a freelance publisher.)

The Konrads storyline was a dream for the media. In 1949, John Konrads Snr, a dental technician, and his wife, Elsa, a dentist, had arrived in Australia on an immigrant ship, with children Eve, 9, John, 7, and Ilsa, 5, after fleeing Soviet-controlled Latvia.

They went to a migrant hostel in Wagga Wagga, an old RAAF base with a pool, where the Konrads kids learned to swim, John showing an uncanny natural turn of speed.

The family moved to live in the back of a house in the Sydney suburb of Revesby, and 19-year-old Don Talbot, a teacher at their local primary school and an apprentice coach at Bankstown Baths, took John, aged 11, on the back of his motorbike to swim a time trial.

Ilsa explains: "I was the accidental swimmer - the brat little sister who said, 'Johnny's doing swimming and I want to, too!'"

The junior coach knew he'd "got lucky", quit teaching, and the trio's relationship snowballed.

"Ilsa and I became like peas in a pod, and Don, our coach and mentor, was always there," says John. "Don collected us in his car at 5.45am, as our parents didn't have a car; Ilsa and I trained together, caught buses and trains to school, then back after school for more training, then train and bus home."

Their training conditions sound primitive today. "Bankstown pool was a zoo!" snorts Talbot. There were no dedicated training lanes, so his squad had to fight through the jostling public crowded into the pool.

"We were young thugs," Ilsa confesses. "Freestylers swimming with clenched fists, backstrokers straight over the top of anyone, breaststrokers with vicious kicks to groins..."

They wore square-cut Speedos, but there were no goggles, no biodynamic analysis, no underwater cameras or computers scrutinising every stroke. Medically, "only heart rate and blood iron levels were checked, we took vitamin pills and were told to eat lots of protein, so Johnny and I ate lots of steak while the rest of the family ate God knows what," Ilsa recalls.

As for psychology: it consisted of the rote phrase repeated by back-slapping teachers, mayors, RSL club officials: "Now don't get a swelled head!"

"Things like depression weren't ever talked about, we didn't know what they were," says Talbot.

John says earnestly: "We were being trained to win, and I loved pushing myself through the pain barrier. I set unrealistically high expectations of myself, as I had such a strong competitive need to win. Winning made me feel superior, it fed my ego. It's taken me decades to realise I'd set a trap for myself."

Meanwhile, the Konrads parents dealt enterprisingly with the fact that their professional qualifications weren't recognised here. "They ran a low-cost black-market dental service from home," says John. "Mum, now 99, turned a big dining-room chair into her dentist's chair, she had a pedal-pump drill, and Dad made beautiful dentures.

"Our parents were quietly supportive, never pushy; they wouldn't have known how to push."

Culturally, his father never fully adapted to Australia. "The best job he could get was polishing glass in a glass factory. He loved opera, and played classical music constantly. He had a drinking problem, and I have a poignant memory from when I was 15, of finding him at 4am, slumped over a bottle and weeping, with opera playing."

He died when John was 23, of a brain tumour and cirrhosis of the liver.

It wasn't only at home that Konrads was exposed to excessive drinking. A lot of hard drinking used to go on at the big amateur meets. John was 16 and competing at the 1958 Commonwealth Games in Cardiff "when I learned that after the hard work of winning medals, you drank, not to celebrate, but to get disgustingly pissed, and the person most pissed was the most respected. Older athletes led the young ones into it, and I eagerly let myself be led

astray, drinking half a bottle of Vat 69. Partying and pillow fights got out of hand, some athletes trashed rooms."

After winning one gold and two bronze at the 1960 Rome Olympics, Konrads relished both being a celebrity and having one drink too many. "I liked mixing with famous and influential people, I liked the good life. I'd get on a high, and the more I drank, the higher I'd go, and John's the life of the party again, playing the clown, the naughty boy, flirting.

"It got in the way of my fitness, and maybe I would have been a greater swimmer and my career would have lasted longer if it hadn't."

Konrads spoke to Good Weekend with such acute openness that Don Talbot, when told this, worried that the lad he'd coached from age 11 was being too harsh on himself.

Talbot's gravelly voice became emotional and emphatic: "John's hardly the only one who got into trouble. His parents didn't have a clue how to deal with the pressures and subtleties of being an elite athlete. I had a whole squad of swimmers to look after.

"John has always been an extremely capable and talented person, who wanted to push himself. He's a very likeable, generous and compassionate man. He was the most articulate and sociable of the swimmers of his time, but probably too handsome and too much of a party-goer for his own good.

"But remember, swimmers in John's day were unpaid amateurs who did it for the glory of sport and a pat on the back. Financially, they ended up with the arse out of their pants! They didn't have business managers, personal managers, psychologists, scientists, or any of the entourage of professional help that elite athletes get today. John only had me - a junior coach, eight years older than he was."

Talbot did a master's in psychology at age 45, because he came to realise how vital the psychological side is, both in the performance of champions and in the transitional help they should be given when they retire. "Suddenly the dominant part of their life and identity ... the training routine, coach barking at them, the discipline, competing, being the centre of attention, the euphoria of winning, cheering of the crowd ... it's all gone.

"The crucial problem with fame is the higher you go, the more dangerous the fall.

If you don't know how to handle fame or don't get the right help, then loss of fame can destroy you."

If the amateurs of that era had been allowed to earn money from their talent, treat it as a career and hire personal managers, would Konrads and others

have been more disciplined and stayed swimming longer? "Undoubtedly yes," say both Konrads and Talbot.

But swimming did open doors, and Konrads was showered with invitations to dinner parties, glitterati events, TV chat shows. "I began to feel it was my natural milieu." Kerry Packer was a drinking mate, and Channel 9 called, saying: "We're going to make you a star." But his 1960 teen music program, The John Konrads Show, lasted only one season.

At 19, Konrads was offered a sports scholarship at the University of Southern California, began a business studies degree and completed 2 1/2 years. But away from Talbot's steadying influence, Californian girls and Coors beer occupied too much of his time. He returned to Australia to try for the '64 Tokyo Olympics, just scraped into the relay team, swam only in the heats, and after Tokyo retired.

The Californian university, requiring wins, halved his scholarship, so he remained in Sydney. "Suddenly," he says, "I was a has-been - 'Konrads is washed up at 21' - and I felt bloody depressed."

Ilsa, who had failed to make the Tokyo team, also retired. "I was so weary of slogging up and down the pool, it was a huge relief to quit. I was thrilled, free at last! I never missed swimming - what's to miss? I never needed to go through a grieving process, I just got on with an interesting new life. In truth, I think Johnny missed the adulation, not the swimming."

Another door opened for Konrads when tennis champ Lew Hoad mentioned that a Frenchman he knew was opening a ritzy country club north of Paris, and wanted an Olympian as director of swimming.

Konrads leapt at it. "The French love success, and once again I was a bloody hero. It felt fantastic." He lived in a luxurious environment, teaching the wealthy to swim. But instead of being seduced by the rich and glamorous women who chased after the golden boy, he fell passionately in love with a non-dazzled Dutch au pair, and married her in the first year. She was to prove the rock in his life.

Over lunch in the courtyard of their Sydney apartment, Mikki Konrads recalls how, despite the exciting life they lived for the next five years, invited to stay in chateaus and sail on luxury yachts, her husband began to feel empty. "John desperately wanted to prove that he could be successful in something other than swimming," says Mikki, "not so much for the money, but for the kudos, the recognition."

"I didn't want to grow into one of those poolside old men with lizard skin, cracked feet, a stopwatch on a fat belly and a whistle in my mouth," mutters Konrads.

Mikki happened to play tennis with the vice-president of cosmetics company L'Oréal, who happened to be looking for someone to manage their business in Australia. Konrads joined L'Oréal in Paris, and after a year's training was sent in 1973 to Melbourne, aged 30, as managing director of L'Oréal Australia and New Zealand.

"With hindsight, I was over-promoted," he now frankly admits, "but of course my brash ego wouldn't acknowledge that to myself at the time. I was an MD in an important international company, so I was successful, wasn't I? I didn't need the deep and meaningful with anyone. Another trap I set myself."

Moving to Melbourne, Konrads turned his back on swimming for the next 17 years, took up tennis, golf, windsurfing. He wanted the things he didn't have as a child, and "emulated what successful people did". He prided himself on being a good provider. "I had a lovely big home in Brighton, a beautiful non-working wife, three kids at private schools. We lived well, entertained well, and kept up with the Joneses."

Until the Melbourne move, the highs of Konrads' bipolar disorder (see box) had predominated, and were written off as just part of his exuberant personality - "John's over the top again". Any lows he could shake off.

Now came a pattern of severe lows.

"Every springtime, come September, I felt I couldn't cope with the complexities and pressures of business any more - I kept going outside and walking round the block. This gloomy low lasted till Christmas, when the festive season highs took over."

L'Oréal was satisfied with his performance, indeed kept him there for 14 years. When Konrads told a visiting L'Oréal executive that he worried he was not on top of the job, the executive responded that maybe he'd been at his most successful when he had a coach, but now his coach - that is, his corporate bosses - were thousands of kilometres away in Paris.

Konrads felt insulted. He was an adult now and didn't need a coach; he could set his own targets for his personal best, solve his own problems. Big boys don't whinge to the coach.

The job was busy. He travelled 90 days a year, attended international sales conferences in exotic locations, was great at PR, marketing and people skills, not too good on controlling costs, loved a lot of it, everyone loved him. But gnawing away inside were uncertainties: was he really up to being a winner in a field outside swimming? Was he hired because of his business skills or his charisma?

The more Konrads lashed himself, the more his confidence slipped and mood swings grew. "I drank heavily and was too uninhibited at convention parties, losing some of my authority," he feels. "I realised effective CEOs did seek out coaches, i.e., mentors, to clarify ideas and get feedback, so I felt I'd failed.

"I felt my performance had plateaued, and the company indicated I'd probably gone stale, and offered to move me back to Paris." But he felt they were just being kind to him, so he resigned and took a golden handshake.

Konrads could have easily glossed over all of the above and, like a lot of other departed CEOs, spin-doctored it to make it sound wonderful, but after a year in therapy, he's almost painfully honest about everything.

He blew his super and the golden handshake to buy a holiday house in Portsea. "We lived like kings, beyond our means," says Mikki. "I kept saying to John, 'This is ridiculous, where is all this money coming from?' and he'd gaily reply, 'Darling, don't worry.'"

Doors opened again: Sir Peter Abeles made him marketing manager of Ansett; later he became head of the Melbourne Major Events Company. Still he felt he wasn't performing like an Olympic champion, wasn't thrashing the competition so he could bask in the applause.

In the late '90s he sold up in Melbourne and moved the family to Sydney, but hit the real estate boom and couldn't afford a house, so began renting. Warming to the 2000 Olympics hype, he spent \$16,000 on tickets, and also began working out and swimming laps again at the elite Tattersalls Club.

Invited by one of his fellow lappers to join the Black Dog committee, he went along to meetings, never thinking he himself might be depressed. "Who, me? I'd always met every challenge, toughed out every difficulty, and was proud of it."

About that time, he joined a consortium bidding for the lease of the new inner-Sydney Cook + Phillip Park Aquatic Centre, won, and now handles marketing, customers and runs a personal swim clinic, while his business partner handles finance and administration.

The aquatic centre had a good first year, so Konrads took Mikki holidaying in Europe, in 2001. They were staying with her family in Amsterdam when Konrads woke in the middle of the night in physical agony.

"I was used to bearing great pain as a swimmer, but this was worse than any pain I'd experienced; as if someone was rubbing all my nerve endings together in my lower stomach.

"I was gripped by black despair, and felt that everything I'd done since I stopped swimming was a failure. I was 59, and I'd thrown my life away. I always had this high expectation of myself, that I would end up a successful and wealthy man. I used to own two houses, but now I didn't even own one, and was renting. I berated myself that I had no money put aside for retirement.

"I used to be the hero of my family, and my wife's family, but now all her siblings were more successful and wealthier than I was."

He'd dealt with lows before, and bounced back, but the ghastly pain and negative thinking continued. For weeks he did his tough-it-out routine, pushing himself through work appointments, and self-medicating with alcohol, hitting 20 drinks daily, and cigarettes.

Mikki tried to stop him drinking and smoking, and to break through his gloom, but was powerless. He snapped at her to stop nagging, they were fighting all the time and lost the ability to communicate. "I was so used to putting on a front, I couldn't explain to her what was wrong with me. I asked Mikki for more support, and she responded by making sure I had more crispy clean shirts, the dinner was nicer, the floors cleaner. I'd go to dinners for Mikki's sake, but felt so morose I'd isolate myself by staring at my plate, barely talking."

His mood swings to highs continued, but the highs soared higher. "I'd be more the life of the party than ever, flirt outrageously, take naive risks, jump into the spa in the nuddy, embarrass and upset my wife."

Mikki adds: "I'd say, 'John, we're going home, you're drunk,' and he'd yell, 'No, darling, we're just having fun!'"

Being diagnosed with bipolar II, after that meeting with Gordon Parker, was a blessed circuit-breaker, and led to vast all-round improvements in Konrads' life, his work and his relationship with his wife.

With treatment, he says he no longer has downers, the constant negativity has gone. "Some days I might be reflective and sense myself going down, but I can feel this platform catching me. Where I used to sink 10 fathoms, I now only sink one or two. I still get highs, but I'm now more self-aware, and they are enjoyable highs, not out-of-control ones."

Along with the medication, he spent a year seeing a psychologist, and had joint counselling with Mikki. Finally he came to terms with the fact that post-swimming, he'd never reach the same euphoric highs in real life, and he should stop comparing his performance in and out of the pool, and judging himself a failure. Says Konrads: "It helped me change my values, to appreciate more what I've got - a wonderful wife and family - and to see that my own achievements are quite good enough. The biggest thing I've learned is not to have ambitions beyond plausible reality. I've had to adjust my whole psychology from always wanting to win, to not needing to win."

"I no longer value success in terms of money and fame. I still want to be productive and industrious, but realise health, happiness and wellbeing matter more."

In the several days I spent with Konrads, it was apparent that he hadn't lost the taste for rubbing shoulders with the successful and famous. "True," he

agrees, "but my attitude is different now. It's not about feeding my ego. Now I regard them as mentors, and hope some of their wisdom will rub off on me."

He's given up drinking, but is finding it a struggle to stop smoking. "He wants to be a good person, disciplined and strong again - because he is," stresses Mikki.

I wanted to see Konrads swimming, so joined in one of his clinics. He still has a swimmer's physique, and swims the way he walks, with muscular grace, back as broad as a table, slim hips, powerful arms and big hands.

"Technically my big hands are more useful to power myself through the water than Thorpie's big feet that the media go on about - kick is only 5 per cent of swim speed," he reckons, smiling.

Today, even wearing goggles, the light is back in his eyes.

Highs and lows

* People have a genetic propensity towards bipolar mood disorder, and environmental factors trigger it, says Professor Gordon Parker. The figure commonly given for lifetime rates is 1 to 2 per cent of the population, about half with bipolar I and half with bipolar II. "But because bipolar II is less clear cut," says Parker, "it often takes 12 to 15 years from onset to diagnosis."

People with both forms suffer mood swings from lows to highs.

The lows - what Winston Churchill called "the black dog" - are similar. Depression saps energy and often the will to live, and everything appears negative and hopeless.

The highs, however, are different. "In bipolar I," says Parker, "formerly called manic depression, highs last longer and people go psychotic, hallucinate, don't sleep, libido rages, they think they have supernatural powers - that they are Christ or can swim to America.

"People on bipolar II highs don't become psychotic or hallucinate. They get racy, pacy, talkative, uninhibited. Creativity and work output may rise, but libido and need for alcohol also rise. They can be very funny and infectious to a certain level and appear in a perfect euphoric state, then get irritable, scratchy, and make rash decisions like spending too much money, or take risks and get into terrible situations.

"Many creative people and high achievers have bipolar I or II, and say they ride their highs to success, even use lows creatively, and don't want treatment. But in others, the disorder gets out of hand, and treatment can greatly improve their quality of life."

For information on all forms of depression, contact the Black Dog Institute, (02) 9382 4523, or Beyond Blue, (03) 9810 6100.

Caption: SEVEN ILLUS: Going the distance: (insets, clockwise from left) the Konrads family at home in the late '50s; John, at right, with coach Don Talbot, sister Ilsa and fellow lapper Alan Kable in 1957, the year before his first world record; with second placegetter Murray Rose and US bronze medallist George Breen after the 1500 metres freestyle in Rome; as MD of L'Oréal's Australian operation. fairfax photo library (5); jennifer soo

"I couldn't explain what was wrong with me. I asked Mikki for more support, and she responded by making sure I had more crispy clean shirts, the dinner was nicer, the floors cleaner": John and Mikki Konrads at home in Sydney.
jennifer soo

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