

PUSHING HIMSELF TO THE LIMIT

Even his doctors are amazed he's still alive. But after leukaemia, a lung transplant and a double hip replacement, Damien Thompson is preparing for the Transplant Games.

Story ELISSA LAWRENCE



Damien Thompson is an expert in turning problems into challenges. And his problems have been plenty. There has been the small matter of not being able to breathe well enough to walk more than a few steps. Or his hips crumbling in their sockets. Or having no balance from a destroyed nerve connection between his ears and eyes. Or his tongue being burnt black by radiation. Or his double lung transplant that is, frustratingly, being attacked by his body. But to Thompson, all these things have simply been obstacles to overcome. Challenges, not problems.

Thompson, 34, of Kangaroo Point in inner city Brisbane, had his world turned upside down when, previously healthy and strong, he was diagnosed with an acute and aggressive form of leukaemia at age 23.

He has since endured a litany of treatment and medical complications that would have crushed the wills of most others.

He has undergone a bone-marrow transplant, a double-lung transplant and double hip replacements as well as multiple other operations to fix his eyes, stomach and sinuses. His doctors dubbed him The Bionic Man.

Thompson has had an epic struggle to survive. But he is not just content with that. He has doggedly challenged himself to get fitter and stronger, bloody-mindedly pushing his body to keep going, to achieve his next goal.

In 2018, determined to keep the function of his new lungs from deteriorating, he set out to conquer the Kangaroo Point cliff stairs, a popular fitness hotspot. He took eight full months to be able to walk up the whole set of stairs, then another eight months to run them.

Though by no means out of the woods medically, Thompson now regularly goes to the gym to build his strength and has set his sights on competing in the next Australian Transplant Games. He has also started a charity called Chimera Legacy Foundation (a nod to his body containing three sets of DNA – his own and two from his transplant donors) to promote organ donation and develop virtual reality headsets to relax and educate patients about their treatment.

His incredible fight for life is the subject of a documentary, titled *Bionic Man*, planned for release later this year, that will feature celebrity comedian Dave Hughes and music by singer Delta Goodrem. Streaming giant Netflix has also expressed interest in the production.

Goal driven and stubborn, Thompson grew up in Townsville, the second of four sons to Bob and Debbie Thompson, business owners of Bayswater Road Radiators. His mother raised her sons with a clear message of “you can”. You didn’t say “can’t” to Debbie Thompson.

He and his brothers – Aaron, 38, Ben, 32, and Casey, 30 – attended Ryan Catholic College and grew up with a love of camping and fishing. He played soccer from age seven, later making Townsville and North Queensland representative teams.

From an early age, he was involved in the family business – sweeping the floors as a young kid and then working there full time after finishing Grade 12.

Thompson was busy with life – working, playing soccer for the local Rebels soccer club



EPIC STRUGGLE: Damien Thompson bares the scars of his surgeries; and, above, with mum Debbie after his double lung transplant in 2017.

at Kirwan, going to the gym five times a week, saving to buy a house – when life as he knew it stopped.

A throbbing, “heavy” pain that started in his lower back, progressed up his spine to his chest. He went to the pharmacy and bought vitamins, he tried to sleep it off, but on Father’s Day 2010, he walked, shaking and in immense pain, into the emergency department of Townsville General Hospital. A blood test revealed his white blood cells were “through the roof” and he was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL), an aggressive form of blood and bone marrow cancer.

“I was very active and fit, 10 foot tall and bulletproof. For something like that to come along, it was shocking to everyone,” Thompson

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says. “No one believed it. I was a bit of a prankster and everyone thought I was joking.”

Thompson had three months of chemotherapy in Townsville before he was stable enough to move to Brisbane in January 2011 for a bone-marrow transplant – thanks to a donor match with his brother Aaron – in March that year. Before the transplant, Thompson had to first endure more high-dose chemotherapy and full-body radiation treatment.

“They (doctors) say they basically kill you so you have no immune system left and then they give you a new immune system,” he says.

“You know it needs to be done but you also know the damage it is doing. What is between you and the radiation machine is a bit of lead to protect your lungs and your brain so you don’t

fry. You are strapped in, you can’t move and you are there for half an hour on one side, then they turn you around and do the other side. This happens twice a day, for three days in a row.”

Acute effects of his chemotherapy and radiation – aside from vomiting, diarrhoea and losing his hair – left Thompson with a burnt tongue and oesophagus and he needed to be fed intravenously for almost two weeks.

Most seriously, he developed a dangerous auto-immune condition called acute Graft Versus Host Disease (GVHD), triggered when the transplanted donor immune cells began attacking his body and organs.

Thompson’s new immune system attacked his skin “so I looked like a burns victim” and, most worryingly, the disease attacked his lungs, causing fibrosis (similar to scar tissue) that leads to a build up of connective tissue and, eventually, organ failure. This is why he needed a double lung transplant in June 2017.

The cocktail of drugs and treatments to keep him alive also caused the femoral heads of his hips to “turn to dust”, making walking agony and resulting in his double hip replacements.

He has undergone cataract and laser surgery to his eyes, surgeries to tighten the top of his stomach to control serious reflux and to his sinuses. He has had his lifetime quota of radiation – including ultraviolet radiation from the sun – and can only have light on his skin for 20 minutes before 8am.

He has had to retrain his brain to walk because the nerve connection between his ears and eyes was destroyed by chemo, affecting his balance. For a year he could only walk without falling over if he watched his feet.

“The time after my bone marrow transplant and before my lung transplant was a huge struggle,” Thompson says. “I couldn’t do day-to-day activities, I could only just shower myself and walk to the couch but that was it.”

“I was walking around with a wheelee walker because of the pain in my hips. And I couldn’t breathe. But I had to keep moving because if I didn’t I would build up fluid in my lungs or get pneumonia and die.”

“To keep myself motivated and going, I’d walk around Kangaroo Point at least once a day with my wheelee walker and just hope I

would get on the lung transplant list.”

When Thompson was accepted onto the transplant list, his hips worsened (“they just crumbled”). Doctors, worried he wouldn’t be able to walk after the lung transplant to get his new lungs working properly, talked of taking him off the list.

But Thompson had other ideas, convincing his doctors “that was a stupid idea” and that he would be able to do it. After 10 months on the waiting list, his new lungs were transplanted. Four months after that, he got his new hips.

“The only reason I got on the transplant list was because of my attitude and that I maintained my physical fitness, somehow, as best I could,” he says.

“It’s being stubborn. I was very focused. It was >

FEATURE



“AS SOON AS I CHANGED THAT PERSPECTIVE, IT CHANGED EVERYTHING”

just the will to live. There's so much to do and I suppose I am very competitive and I don't shy away from a challenge.

“After my lung transplant, I was on a walker and just had to bear the pain. It taught me a lot in terms of mentally controlling my situation.

“Yes, there was a lot of pain but I'd focus my attention on my toe or wrist and divert my attention away. And keep walking.”

Dr Doug Wall, 51, Thompson's cardiothoracic surgeon who performed his double lung transplant at Prince Charles Hospital, says Thompson is one of only a handful of patients who have also undergone bone marrow transplants from cancer treatment.

“There are not many patients like him,” Wall says. “He's had a lot of things that have tried to kill him and he has defied the odds many times.”

“If you look at the outcomes for everything he's gone through – his leukaemia should have got him.

“Then having a bone-marrow transplant comes with a huge risk. He had a good chance of not making it then.

“Despite that, he fronts up for a double lung transplant, another big life-risk event, and he gets through that.

“You might call it luck but he has made his own luck. He works hard to keep himself well. He's doing a lot to help himself.”

One of Thompson's resolutions is to do something every day that makes him uncomfortable, to “remind myself that I'm alive”.

Like doing this Qweekend interview and photo shoot, speaking at Rotary Clubs to raise money, or being bold and ringing his favourite comedian Dave Hughes and asking him to be involved in an event for his Chimera Legacy Foundation charity. (Hughes agreed and flew from Melbourne for the 2019 event, called Comedy for a Cure, that raised \$20,000 for GVHD research.)

Thompson is ambitious and determined for his charity to make a difference. He is developing a virtual reality program for patients to help explain their disease and treatment through simulations that will in turn reduce their stress.

He wants a national roll out of the technology



AMBITIOUS: Damien Thompson at Fitness First gym; and at left, with QIMR Berghofer's Dr Siok Tey, comedian Dave Hughes and MC Mike Goldman at Comedy for a Cure in 2019.

and is in discussions with Icon, Australia's largest dedicated provider of cancer care.

He also wants to make a difference with the documentary. Filmmaker and director Gustavo Diaz, who contacted Thompson after Comedy for a Cure, has filmed him in many locations – in Townsville where he grew up, at his old school, on Magnetic Island where he goes to relax (and where he isolated when there were heightened COVID-19 fears), at his gym at Fitness First in Brisbane's CBD where he works out to “prepare for my next hospital admission”.

His family, friends and doctors have been interviewed as well as comments sought from groups such as QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, DonateLife, Transplant Australia and Lifeblood, a branch of Australian Red Cross.

One of his closest friends, James Vedelago, 33, of Newstead, who has known Thompson since they were in Grade six, says his friend is a person who “always sees the up side”.

“Damo is really positive. He's a larrikin ... even with all the things he's gone through, or having his chemo, he can still have a joke,” Vedelago says.

“It's been one thing after the other for him but he's started his charity and he's brought a lot of people together and set them on a common cause. He has this untapped leadership capability and a strong bias to action, to get things done.”

Vedelago, an electrical engineer for BHP who is also Chimera Legacy Foundation chair, says he and Thompson, who played soccer together, were sometimes in trouble at school.

“As a kid, he was out there riding skateboards, motorbikes, on scooters doing jumps and tricks. He has always had a high appetite for risk taking,” he says.

“We were called into detention together and on behaviour cards. He led me astray a bit.

“As an adult, he teaches me to enjoy life and look on the bright side. To see what he has gone through, yet how much of a brave face he puts on ... it takes a certain character to do that.”

So how do you remain positive in the face of a seemingly never-ending list of debilitating and life-threatening health conditions?

For a time, Thompson admits he was overwhelmed. He struggled. He sat in his home and believed it was all too hard.

“Every time I tried to fix myself there was something else that would break. It was one step forward, two steps back. It was just overwhelming. Then I thought, ‘You're an idiot’. If you don't do something you're going to die. No one is going to help you but you.

“And that's when I decided to turn my problems into challenges.

“As soon as I changed that perspective, it changed everything.”

His deteriorating lung function was indeed a problem. But seen as a challenge, he pledged to be able to conquer the Kangaroo Point cliff stairs, one step at a time.

This also addressed the “problem” of being unfit. He went to the gym – his goal is to get on the cover of Fitness First magazine and make it to the Transplant Games.

He faced the problem of being stuck indoors and not socialising, and so he started his charity.

“My doctors are amazed that I am still alive and that I am doing so well and then above and beyond that with the charity work,” Thompson says.

“Doctors say no running or cycling in the Transplant Games but I don't mind what event I am in. I'd do javelin, golf, table tennis. Anything to get there.”

Dr Doug Wall says Thompson is “the most fantastic individual you can meet”.

“If you looked at his life, there are so many things he could be negative about, so many things, the list is growing all the time.

“But he doesn't whinge, whine or complain, he just gets on with it,” he says.

“He's not going to have a normal lifespan. He's got a shortened amount of time and he is using it wisely. He is certainly an inspiration.”

At the end of each day, Thompson sits under a tree by the river, quietly and alone. It's a routine that grounds him and reminds him to keep looking forward.

“Mum always told us there was no such thing as ‘can't’. She taught us to never give up and I don't think I can,” he says.

“It has been a huge struggle but I have a lot of family support and a good team of doctors.

“I'm very fortunate.” ■ chimeralegacyfoundation.org.au