

Couple help each other through personal pain barriers



Gold Coast pair Craig Walton and Emma Snowsill look ahead to a golden future

● Picture: Jono Searle

Love conquers all

Pat McLeod

HE helped her find love again. She is helping him put the pieces of his sporting life back in place.

Together they form the most exciting partnership in world triathlon.

Emma Snowsill and Craig Walton flew out for Hawaii yesterday, behind them, hopefully, is a world of pain, in front a golden future.

Snowsill, 23, is competing in the opening World Cup triathlon race, in Honolulu this weekend. Walton, 29, still recovering from a severe bout of glandular fever, will be playing the tourist.

"I'll be the one wearing the Hawaiian shirt while she is in her race gear," he chides her, before Snowsill fires back: "But there is no way we are watching the men's race, we will be down on Waikiki Beach by then."

They laugh often and easily when together. The perfect couple.

Craig only lightly hints at what his partner has come through as he talks about Snowsill's strengths and the exciting prospects of 2005.

"The things in life that she has been through have made her tougher mentally," he said. "She is mentally tougher than most other athletes I have seen."

Snowsill, with Walton as her main support, has made it to the top in her sport after being devastated when her boyfriend Luke Harrop was killed in a hit-run accident while training on the Gold Coast in January 2002.

There were long months when she doubted she would ever race again but, with the gentle guiding hand of coach Brett Sutton, she rejoined the competitive ranks.

Then in late 2003 she won the stellar Noosa triathlon. The men's winner that day was Craig Walton. Something sparked and the two have been together ever since.

"He is my biggest support system," said Snowsill of Walton.

"He is my coach now and helps me in all those departments.

"Outside of triathlon he is an awesome guy. He is my partner and we have a lot of fun together.

"We have the same interests and passions. Even outside triathlon we try to do things that we both enjoy."

BUT the support has not flowed in just the one direction. Last year Walton, a Sydney Games Olympian and one of Australia's best performed triathletes internationally, was literally floored health-wise.

After narrowly missing selection for the Athens Olympics, he took off for his annual overseas break.

"I won the Australian cham-

pionships and was feeling really good, then I went overseas and things went downhill," he said.

"I started travelling too much, wasn't settled in my diet and things just weren't happening in my races. I went to (the training base in) Oregon and that is when the glandular fever hit me and since then it has just been a nightmare."

Snowsill takes up the story: "It was a very acute dose and at the time we did not know what it was. Only when we came back to Australia two or three months later that we got a blood test and pinpointed it exactly."

Walton said the illness was a major blow.

"Up until a week ago I didn't want to get out of bed and I couldn't train," he said. "I tried competing in Hobart and Geelong this year. Hobart, I got through it but didn't feel great.

"In Geelong, things went worse and I got out of the swim and I couldn't run to my bike. I just knew there is no point racing.

"There was no spark. It was like having six cylinders but only operating on three or four. There was no top end speed."

But a week ago Walton sought out an opinion from a Gold Coast medico, who appears to have placed him on the road to recovery.

"I am feeling normal again," said Walton. "The last six months I

knew there was something there, I just couldn't pinpoint it. At least now my body feels right and I just have to build my strength.

"It will be a bit of a long road, I think I can get back. I am waking up in the morning now feeling like I have slept the night where previously I was like a wrung out rag."

Snowsill also had her time on the sideline last year.

After a sensational 2003 when she won the world championships, a world cup race and the Australian championships, she was sidelined for the start of the 2004 season with a stress fracture to the femur.

"I was out for a good six months," she said.

"A lot of that was my own fault, trying to push it too early and I have learnt from that.

"For the first half of last year I was out and then second half Craig was out."

AS Walton has battled to come to grips with his own health during the start of 2005, Snowsill is in great form.

She has already won an international race in Hobart and the Australian Olympic distance championships in Geelong.

Both she and Walton are now eyeing some rich overseas races, especially one in Minnesota in July.

The Life Time Fitness Triathlon is the sport's jackpot, a unique

handicap race that pits men against women with the winner taking away \$320,000.

Gold Coast Olympic silver medalist Loretta Harrop struck it rich last year, but now she is facing a major hometown threat to defend her title.

"I have won the men's section at Minnesota for the last three years, but I have not been able to catch the women," said Walton.

"Emma has never raced it but is in good form.

"With her racing this year it will give me even more incentive to catch the women."

There is also the golden lure of another kind, Commonwealth and Olympic medals.

Walton led for most of the swim and bike legs in the Sydney Games but in a race where drafting was allowed, he fell back dramatically in the run and finished 27th.

"The Commonwealth Games are a big thing for me," said Walton. "I raced in the Sydney Olympics and was really disappointed with what I did there.

"I really want to represent Australia again and do a lot better and that is the big challenge for me."

The Olympics also hold a special place for Snowsill.

"To win two gold medals would be a dream," she said. "That would mean you have won against the best of the best."