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Making a friend of PAIN

Emma Snowsill spends her days chasing pain. What the dictionary defines as "bodily or mental suffering or distress", something all human beings are programmed at birth to avoid, Emma Snowsill seeks, welcomes, embraces.

In some ways pain could be said to dominate her professional life. Without it, both in training and competing, she knows she is not doing herself justice.

This is the masochistic world of an elite triathlete.

"You tell yourself to make pain your friend," says Snowsill, a triple world champion, reigning Commonwealth Games champion and a gold medal favourite for the triathlon in Beijing.

"I chase it, but I don't concentrate on it. It's more like I'm telling myself to deal with it and not give in to it.

"When I race I want to break the line feeling like I've given it everything I possibly could."

In a continuing series of profiles in the lead-up to Beijing, John Coomber talks to triathlon dynamo Emma Snowsill, who is bidding to become Australia's first Olympic gold medallist in the sport.

EMMA SNOWSILL

BORN: June 15, 1981, Gold Coast

HEIGHT: 161cm

WEIGHT: 48kg

COACH: Craig Walton

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS:
World champion 2003, 2005, 2006
Commonwealth Games gold medal 2006

riding her bike. Triathlon could have been invented for her.

"There's no one else sporting in my family. All my family have been driven in other aspects of their life, but just not sport. I guess I can only attribute my competitiveness to coming from them in some way."

Snowsill, 27, learnt much about triathlon and ultimately herself from close friend Loretta Harrop, who won the silver medal in Athens after being agonisingly run down by Geelong-born Australian Kate Allen in the last 150 metres.

It was doubly heartbreaking for Harrop, who had dedicated the race to her brother Luke, killed in a hit-run accident while on a training ride on the Gold Coast two years earlier.

"When I first started training I was very close to Loretta and she

pretty much taught me the tricks of the trade as far as the head goes," Snowsill said.

There's not much of Snowsill who stands 161cm and weighs 48kg. But one thing about her that is not small is her appetite, which she cheerfully describes as "extreme".

"I'm always thinking about food. It's something that consumes my thoughts. When I'm not training I'm pretty much at the shop every day getting more food."

Like all elite athletes, a social life is something Snowsill can only look forward to in retirement.

And like all elite athletes, Snowsill is obsessed with health and fitness.

She wondered if she might be overdoing things last year when her body began to fail her.

"I was picking up coughs and colds and viruses, and continually feeling really tired and run down. I didn't know what the problem was," she said.

After a lot of testing the problem turned out to be something no one had expected. Asthma.

Snowsill says she has no worries about how her asthma will be affected by Beijing's notorious smog, which has already caused marathon champion and fellow asthmatic Haile Gebrselassie of Ethiopia to pull out rather than risk what he termed "suicide".

"I've got my treatment planned and programmed. For me it's as much a non-issue as it is for anyone else going there," she said.

Nor is she worried by the prospect of extreme heat and humidity, which she thinks might actually play into her hands.

Being a Gold Coast girl helps. "I was born here and I still live and train here, so I'm really used to hot weather. Maybe that's one thing I will have in Beijing over some other people."

THE BIG HIT

Before they break that line, triathletes have to swim 1.5km in open water, ride 40km on a bike (with hills), and run 10km (also with hills). Three endurance events in succession. No rest. No easy bits. In Olympic competition the women swim, bike and run just as far as the men. It takes them around two hours - about 10% longer than the men. Snowsill doesn't know where she gets her competitive steel from.

"For as long as I can remember I've always wanted to get out and play sport, and go swimming training and make sure I do the whole session and never miss a session," she says.

She had her first swimming lesson at 18 months, was a junior lifesaver and loved running and

