

BREATH TAKING

A DETERMINED ATHLETE'S JOURNEY FROM SICKBED TO STARDOM. BY MARK ETHERIDGE



The same lungs that nearly killed her as a 16-year-old helped earn Nolene Conrad the honour of being South Africa's first IAAF Gold Label athlete this year.

Seventeen years ago, the Cape Town student suffered a major asthma attack, passing out due to a lack of oxygen. The doctor who saved her life at the hospital gave her an option: 'Change your lifestyle and start exercising or be dead before you turn 21.'

Conrad had a week in hospital to absorb those words. Three days later she watched a school friend run a local cross-country race and a week later she was on the starting line herself – barefoot, with asthma pump in hand.

'I didn't tell my parents I was running; physical activity could spark an attack and they didn't have the finances for hospital bills,' recalls Conrad. 'I collapsed at all my races and finished only one race that season.'

But the next year she was back, healthier and stronger after off-season training at Pentech. 'I consistently placed in the top three and won my first race the next year when I was in Grade 11.'

It was around that time that she started dreaming of the impossible. 'When I started to take an interest in running my role models were Elana Meyer and Rene Kalmer. I was also inspired by Geraldine Pillay and Janice Josephs - I looked up to them as I admired them for achieving against the odds.'

'As a 16-year-old I watched them compete at the 2002 Commonwealth Games and that motivated me to work hard so I too could represent my country, something I did at the next Commonwealth Games in 2006. I asked myself: if they could achieve it, what's stopping me? We came from similar

backgrounds - rough communities where we were exposed to social ills. My family depended on neighbours and community members to survive when times were tough.'

This year sees Conrad awarded IAAF Gold Label status for having achieved a top-25 finish at the IAAF World

Half-Marathon Championships in Valencia, Spain. The status is a ticket to success, earning the holder invites to leading races around the globe.

En route to this achievement, Conrad won the 2014 national cross-country title, her first, at the age of 28. 'That was such a highlight as the competition was tough. Cross-country will always be my love after I started out with the objective of getting healthy.'

On the track she's shown just as much class. 'I specialised in the 3 000m steeplechase. My highlight in that discipline came in 2006 when I surprised everyone, including myself, by winning my first senior SA title in a new national record time - still as a junior and with my asthma pump tucked into my crop top.'

These days she's more of a roadster. 'I ran the Spar ladies series in my last year of junior racing, which encouraged and motivated me as I was so inspired by the top runners. I remember racing

GETTING TO KNOW NOLENE

Favourite food: 'That's easy: Thai green curry and pizza.'

What she's listening to: 'I enjoy Drake, The Weekend and Beyonce. I'm also a fan of Ed Sheeran and Matthew Mole.'

Best way to chill: 'A perfect day for me would be a picnic at a wine farm with a beautiful view.'

Current ride and dream ride: 'I drive a Ford Fiesta 1.4 Ambiente but I've always had a secret love affair with the VW Golf GTi. It's such a powerful car.'

Clothing choices: 'I still shop in the kiddies section. Weighing only 48kg, I easily fit into the 11-12 age-group clothing.'



ROGER SEDRESGALLO IMAGES

NOLENE CONRAD



'My vision is to represent South Africa at the Olympics one day and I'm setting my sights on the marathon in Tokyo 2020'

against Rene [Kalmer] and always starting out too fast – just because I wanted to run with her, even if it was just for one or two kilometres. She was my role model and a great example to us juniors; she's an incredibly versatile athlete and very humble!

Conrad has now run four marathons; her first being the Hanover Marathon in Germany four years ago, which she finished in 2hr 54min. 'It was a terrible experience; I hated it because I was cramping from 21km, but I wanted to finish.'

Her best marathon to date was last year's Vienna Marathon. 'I finally ran 2:35 – it was the best feeling ever! Despite people telling me that maybe the marathon was not for me, I stubbornly pursued it in the hopes I would succeed if I kept trying – the story of my life. I loved every bit of the experience and ran conservatively for the entire race because I had to consider the food poisoning I had three days prior. In the end it worked out well.'

EXPERT OPINION

Endurocad academy founder and CEO Elana Meyer is proud to have Conrad as part of the team: 'Nolene is a wonderful role model for our young girls. She's a fantastic athlete and a great example of what you can achieve with hard work and determination. What is even more impressive is the fact that Nolene has managed to build a successful career beyond her running. She's smart, well-educated and willing to learn and grow every day. I believe her best races are still to come – in distance running, consistency is key to performance and today she's physically and mentally a lot stronger! She's got a great attitude, fantastic sense of humour; she's caring and offers much more than just being a fast runner!'



Away from competition, Conrad continues to use her life experience to help others. She's an ambassador for The Allergy Foundation SA.

'I know how hard it is for kids and for the parents of these kids suffering from asthma and knew that my story could give them hope. It's a cause close to my heart as I support their vision of creating awareness and education for the treatment of asthma.'

Her day job is just as closely connected to sport. She's an athletes' manager at Olympian Elana Meyer's Endurocad centre in Stellenbosch (below).

'I manage 45 local and national athletes on the programme. I communicate with them on a daily basis and ensure they receive the necessary support, which ranges from medical, kit, nutritional supplements and racing opportunities to psychological mentoring and coaching. I accompany them to events and organise skills sessions during the year.'

'I also organise skills and assessment camps where we host 20-25 athletes and identify talent – usually we have two camps per year. I manage the Endurocad/Sacanrun social media too.'

Conrad, who clocks up weeks of 170-180km on the road while in peak marathon training, is still dreaming big. 'My vision is to represent South Africa at the Olympics one day – I'm setting my sights on the 2020 marathon in Tokyo. I've been working with my team on a four-year plan towards Tokyo and it's all been going according to plan.'

All of which probably leaves her a little breathless ... only with excitement, of course. ■