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# the long road back

DEPRESSED? NO WAY. SHE WAS A SUPERCHARGED ULTRARUNNER. SHE RACED HUNDREDS OF KILOMETRES ON THE TOUGHEST COURSES, AND WON. THEN ONE DAY LISA SMITH-BATCHEN WOKE UP AND COULDN'T RUN A STEP. BY CHRISTOPHER MCDOUGALL





**COLD COMFORT:** Near her home in the Grand Tetons, Lisa Smith-Batchen heads out for a run. Before her battles with depression, she routinely logged 100Ks a week.

LISA SMITH-BATCHEN DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHY SHE WAS BEHIND THE wheel that afternoon in early 2005, until she saw the long plunge to the rocky canyon floor beneath Teton Pass in Wyoming, and it suddenly made sense. She hates heights, but for once the view didn't frighten her. It felt restful. It felt...responsible.

"Everyone will be better off without me," she told herself. All the misery her husband, Jay, had gone through because of her. All the terror her five-year-old son, Joshua, had endured because of the mistake she'd made. All the chaos that 20-month-old Annabella had been through. All because of her.

She hadn't planned to drive off the bridge when she set out this afternoon. Or had she? Was it a coincidence that after months of barely being able to drag herself around the house, she had this overpowering urge to get behind the wheel and go? Maybe she just refused to admit, even to herself, the real reason she was backing the van away from her home.

"There's no other way you'll escape this pain," she told herself, which would have surprised anyone who knew her, because pain was her fame; she'd made such a specialty out of mastering pain that she looked forward to it in a race, the way a power lifter looks forward to the feel of steel. But a lot about Lisa had changed; her friends wouldn't have recognised her as the same freckled blonde beauty who – just six months earlier – had glowed at the completion of the first, "Badwater Grand Slam."

To accomplish that, she'd run four major 160K races and the Badwater Ultramarathon, which stretches 220 kilometres across Death Valley in the blistering heat of summer: 860 kilometres and more than 24,000 metres of elevation, the equivalent of 20 trail marathons in just 10 weeks. At one point during her adventure she had to race directly from a finishline in Vermont to a startline in California. But when she had crossed the final finishline, Lisa looked as fresh and beautiful as the day she'd started.

It was the caper on one of the most impressive résumés in ultrarunning, and a fantastic comeback for a woman who at 43 was already a two-time female champ at Badwater and the only American woman to win the fabled Marathon des Sables, a brutal, six-day race across the Sahara.

Her battle with depression and its debilitating effects was finally over, she thought – never imagining that it was about to get much, much worse, and lead her to that treacherously thin road on the edge of the Grand Tetons.

JAY BATCHEN WAS GETTING NERVOUS AS HE WAITED at home for Lisa to return. When she wasn't back by sundown, Jay grabbed the phone and called Lisa's sister, Julie, in Seattle, who immediately got in the car and started driving to Idaho. They both feared they'd made a terrible mistake: It was hard to tell Lisa what to do, but when she disappeared, they realised they should have tried harder.

"You look to someone like Lisa, who's accomplished so much, who's such a great motivator and always so positive, and expect her to be like that every day," Jay says. So even when Jay knew his wife needed help, he hesitated. "Lisa is a strong-willed person, very independent," he explains. "She's excellent at coaching people, but when it comes to turning the tables and guiding Lisa, it has to come from inside her." He wondered if, one way or another, he'd lost her for good.

It had been a long time since he'd seen the dirty-faced desert girl he'd fallen in love with. Jay and Lisa first met at the Marathon des Sables in 1999, where she was on her way to winning the legendary race across the sands. Jay was filming for the *Discovery Channel*, and was bowled over by this...well, vision is the word he uses for the woman who floated toward him through the shimmering heat. Everyone else was sun-beaten and miserable. Lisa was smiling and singing to her Walkman as she huffed over the dunes.

"Her psychological makeup is fascinating," says Sharene Garaman, a clinical psychologist who has known Lisa for several years. "I've never met anyone who believes anything is possible in terms of human achievement, and then goes about proving it. She's unlike any human I've ever known."

Even her initiation into running was a triumph against adversity. She'd tried out for cross country at her high school, but was cut by a coach who said she was too slow and asthmatic. She became a swimmer and springboard diver instead. She struggled with anorexia in college, being a perfectionist in a skin-tight swimsuit can wreak havoc on your self-image, especially with a coach whom she says told her to keep cutting weight at 176 centimetres and 54 kilograms.

It was only after her final swim season in 1985 that Lisa, looking for a way to stay in shape, began running again. She hopped into a 5K race and won. Unlike lap-restricted swimming, running was all about whimsy; Lisa would go running at 3am just because she could, feeling "a freedom I'd never felt before."

Distances were her strength, she soon realised. She notched a 2:48 marathon in the late '80s; completed the Hawaiian Ironman in 1993 and '94 with a 10:33:27 personal best; and then decided she was ready for something longer and tougher.

So in 1995, Lisa lined up next to another rookie named Dean Karnazes at the start of the infamous Badwater Ultramarathon. They would first have to run across Death Valley, a heat-shimmering salt pan where the soles of your running shoes can melt on the asphalt, and then end the race by climbing 4415 metres up Mount Whitney. Karnazes – who'd later become famous as "Ultramarathon Man"

for his obsessive, all-night runs and best-selling book – dropped out about halfway from heat exhaustion. Lisa, on the other hand, nearly stole the show, finishing second among women and fourth overall. She returned to win the women's title in '97, and again in '98.

She's always been at her best when things are worst, tapping reserves of energy and mental resilience so off-the-charts that a team of British sports scientists came to study her in action at Badwater. When she suffered a sprained ankle and a hairline fracture in her right leg on the second day of The Discovery Eco-Challenge Adventure Race in 1997, she strapped on an air cast and kept going, for another six days and 400 kilometres.

That same year at Badwater, her intestines became so infected and inflamed that at one stage it took her four hours to cover nine kilometres. Her crew was urging her to quit, so Lisa sat down, and made a mental list of the pros and cons of continuing. Then she lit an imaginary fire, burned the list, and got back to her feet. She not only finished, but also set a Badwater record for women.

But the race that truly defined her was the 1999 Badwater. Thanks to her featured role in the documentary *Running on the Sun*, plenty of people know that Lisa had to be pulled from the course that year with severe dehydration and rushed to the emergency room, where she spent the night on an IV. What they don't know is that the next morning, long after the winners had finished and the cameras were gone, Lisa left the hospital and returned to the spot where she'd dropped out. There, the two-time champion resumed her run to

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"YOU LOOK TO SOMEONE LIKE LISA, WHO'S ACCOMPLISHED SO MUCH, WHO'S SUCH A GREAT MOTIVATOR AND ALWAYS SO POSITIVE, AND EXPECT HER TO BE LIKE THAT EVERY DAY,"

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the peak of Mount Whitney.

"She'd feel sorry for herself when she couldn't finish a race, then she'd rebound and be out there, motivating other people," says Jay. "But it was a whole different story after we discovered she couldn't have a baby."

That was in 2000, and her first response was, "Yeah, right. I'm Lisa – I can do anything." She was determined to prove the doctors wrong, so she and Jay decided to spend all their savings on in vitro fertilisation. Lisa would also have to endure the two things she hated most: needles and sofas. She'd have to take injections twice per day, and wouldn't be able to work out until the process was over.

The first attempt failed. So did the second. "It was like mourning a death each time," Lisa would later say. Finally, after a full year and three attempts, her IVF specialist discovered that a ruptured appendix 20 years earlier must have damaged Lisa's fallopian tubes. Lisa was devastated, and guilt-stricken; even though Jay was nothing but supportive, she felt that her unbreakable body had let them both down. "I felt hopeless," she would recall.

Lisa started sleeping in. Sometimes, Jay would come home from work and find her still in bed. She'd get up to munch on lollies, then crawl back under the sheets. She was strangely irritable, and drinking. "Not in the closet with a bottle of vodka," says Jay, "but four or five extra glasses of wine."

Still, it had only been a few weeks; it was September 2001, so maybe Lisa just needed more time to get over the rawness of



## RUN IT OUT

### Got the blues? Here's how running can boost your mood

The days when you feel the least like running may be the days you need it the most. Regular exercise has been linked to preventing or treating anxiety and depression, according to *Help for depression: What works (and what doesn't)* published by the Centre of Mental Health Research.

The good news: runners get an even bigger payoff. Sustained exercise, specifically running, appears to have extra benefits, especially when stress and anxiety are concerned. A team of researchers at the University of Missouri-Columbia measured anxiety levels of female runners, aged 18 to 20 and 35 to 45, before and after 33 minutes of moderate or high-intensity exercise. The women who ran at 80 per cent of maximum aerobic capacity (a slightly faster pace than would allow you to carry on a conversation with your running partner) were found to have experienced the sharpest decline in anxiety. What's more, the anxiety relief continued at least 90 minutes after they had stopped exercising.

While running can help keep the positive effects coming, it is important to remember that depression is a complex illness and running is only one part of your treatment plan.

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her disappointment. But then two hijacked planes slammed into the Twin Towers. Lisa and Jay were still living outside New York in Mendham, New Jersey, where Lisa trained elite endurance athletes. One of her clients was working in the towers and barely escaped; but other friends weren't as lucky. Jay and Lisa had discussed moving to the Tetons before, and any reservations they'd had were wiped away. "That's what pushed us over the edge," says Jay. "Lisa feels other people's pain, and knowing people who couldn't get out just added to her sense of helplessness."

Rebuilding her coaching career in a new place would be tough. Lisa and Jay were also crushed to discover that the exhausting adoption screening they'd just begun in New Jersey would have to be started all over again in Wyoming. Those were exactly the kind of challenges that ordinarily would have sparked the competitive fire in Lisa's blue eyes, but when Jay looked into them this time, he saw surrender.

"Deep down, I was hoping that once we got some positive news about the adoption, and she got back on top with racing, things would turn around," says Jay. "That's what I was hoping for, because I didn't know how else to help her."

LISA HAD SEEN A THERAPIST BRIEFLY BEFORE LEAVING New Jersey, but was so stoically stone-faced that depression wasn't even discussed, let alone diagnosed. "Jay is the only one who knew," Lisa would say, "because he saw those days when I couldn't get out of bed."

It was almost comical, consequently, when Lisa was invited to give a motivational talk to a group of charity fund-raisers in March of 2002. Here was a woman who was secretly suffering utter despair talking to an audience about going all out and achieving their dreams. But Lisa pulled it off, and it seemed to awaken something inside her, too. Shortly after, she began taking short walks in the brisk Wyoming spring. One of her old clients called, asking if Lisa could pace her through an 80K race in six weeks. Lisa began a few, tentative jogs, just to gauge her chances of getting into shape that fast.

Bit by bit, her runs got a little longer, and a little easier. Socially, Lisa was still far from her usual self. "If we went to a friend's house who had kids running around, she'd be sad for the next few days," Jay notes – but when she ran, she felt that old surge of exhilaration. She resumed training with such passion that in April, Lisa and her client crossed the finish of the Umstead 80K endurance run as the top two women. And that's when good

news came. An agency had found them a three-year-old boy. They might want to think twice, the agency warned them: Joshua had been adopted before, but was being given up because he was too troubled and withdrawn to even speak. But instead of doubt, Lisa felt a thrill of fate fulfilled. How perfect that a needy youngster would end up here, in the home of a woman who loved nothing better than a long shot and a learning curve.

Joshua came home with them in the autumn of 2002, and that's when Lisa's recovery shifted from incidental to intentional. She was feeling much better – joyful, in fact – but worried that the strain of working, and raising a troubled child, and resuming hardcore ultraracing might cause a relapse. She went to her family doctor who, for the first time, officially diagnosed her as clinically depressed and prescribed antidepressants.

Lisa and Jay found an excellent school for their new son, and a speech therapist – and even a little sister. Six months after adopting Joshua, they brought home infant Annabella. Everything seemed in order. "Her coaching was really taking off, and she seemed like her normal self," says Jay.

Lisa was so delighted, she celebrated the best way she knew how: by strapping on her running shoes and dedicating another impossible challenge to hungry children. She'd already raised tens of thousands of dollars in the past for charity, so in the spring of 2004, she got to thinking.

"No one has ever done Badwater and the four 160K Grand Slam



**PURE JOY:** Since learning she could not have biological children, Lisa and her husband Jay have adopted three kids, including two-year-old daughter Annabella.

ultra races in the same year," she mused. She also knew why. All the races are jammed into the hottest stretch of summer – Western States 100 at the end of June, the Vermont 100 and Badwater in mid-July, Leadville in mid-August, and Wasatch in early September – making the logistics of such a feat as nightmarish as the mileage. There was also no way her body could recover between each race, so she'd be testing her mind as much as her legs.

Whatever it took, Lisa found it. In September of 2004, she completed the "Badwater Slam," with the only prize being the one she wanted most: waiting at the finishline were Joshua and Annabella, her two kids. Finally, she could relax and enjoy being with them. And that's when Joshua disappeared.

**DESPITE DEEP MISGIVINGS, JAY AND LISA HAD AGREED** to meet with Joshua's biological mother before they had adopted him. They knew little about her, and what they knew made them afraid. She was a big woman – 182 centimetres, 90 kilograms – who reportedly had thrown boiling water on someone and done time in jail. But when she heard that another couple was adopting Joshua, she pleaded with the agency to meet his new parents.

Fearing she would derail the adoption, Lisa and Jay agreed. They had a short, awkward meeting, and then the woman returned to California. They thought that was the end of any dealings with the woman. A few months later, Jay and Lisa were horrified to discover that she had moved to Jackson Hole. Right before Christmas 2003, she turned up in Lisa's office. "Please," she said, grabbing Lisa's hands. "I want to see my son."

What, are you crazy? A stunned Lisa thought to herself.

Actually, yes. "I'm bipolar," the woman explained. "But I'm on medication, and I've got a job now." Lisa softened; she knew what it was like to struggle with a mental illness.

Jay was dead-set against it, but Lisa persuaded him to let the woman see the boy occasionally for supervised visits. And for nine months, her visits with Joshua were mostly uneventful. But one day in September, while Joshua was visiting a relative, the woman unexpectedly appeared. By the time Lisa got there Joshua and the woman were gone.

Lisa was frantic. The police began a multistate manhunt. Finally three months since his disappearance the police found Joshua. He was famished and filthy, and eager to go home. Because he'd been through such a confusing nightmare, Lisa and Jay made the hard choice not to press charges, worried that testifying against his birth mother would traumatise Joshua even more.

After the kidnapping, the world changed around them. "It was a nightmare," says Lisa. "I was scared to let Joshua go out to play, because she could drive by and snatch him. We thought we were going to have to change our names, our business, and go on the run in order to save this kid's life."

Unexpectedly, a solution emerged a few weeks later. Jay and Lisa cannot reveal what it is in order to protect Joshua, but one thing is certain: it took a tremendous toll on Lisa. "That began the fastest downward spiral I'd seen," says Jay. "She takes everything to heart and wants to be perfect all the time, and she was devastated by what it had done to us. I saw her reverting to the way she was before the kids – eating junk, sleeping in, no exercise."

One January afternoon, Jay came home to find Lisa on the floor burning with fever. "Call my mum," she whispered as he rushed her to the hospital. "I'm going to die." Jay was frightened more by what she meant than what



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she said: her feeling of death, he realised, was wishful thinking.

Lisa was diagnosed with stress-induced pneumonia and ordered to stay in bed. For the next 16 days, she lay there, thinking. Once some of her strength returned, she got up, started the car, and drove to Teton Pass.

One dangerous misconception about depression is that if you've punched your way out once, you're immune. The sense is, you've figured out how to handle it and have acquired a personal antidote. Runners can be especially prone to the illusion; they tend to be "macho" by nature, and once they see how running kilometres can steady their moods, they consider running as a sure mental-health cure. But for all its proven benefits, running's relationship with depression is a lot more complex.

**IT WAS LATE THE NEXT DAY WHEN JAY GOT THE CALL.** "I hit bottom," Lisa told him. "I didn't know what I was going to do. I was driving over Teton Pass, and I wanted to drive off." She managed to get over the pass safely, and checked herself into a hotel in Jackson Hole. I don't want to die, but I can't see how I'm going to get out of this pain, she thought to herself. I need to escape.

Hitting bottom had one benefit: it finally made Lisa realise she was in the grip of a disorder that could kill her. She needed professional help and a long-term plan. She was fortunate to be close friends with Sharene Garaman, who besides being a sports psychologist was also a former competitive athlete.

Sharene knew Lisa didn't like to be told what to do, so she decided to swap roles; she got Lisa to coach her back into competitive

horseback-riding shape, and during their workouts Lisa would pour out her heart. "She was just so despondent, feeling that she'd failed that child," Sharene says. Relationships aren't like races, she told Lisa – sometimes trying too hard, and hanging on too long, are the worst things you can do. But it wasn't penetrating. "She couldn't hear me," says Sharene. "It's difficult for anyone to break out of depression, but what made it harder for Lisa was that she knew running would help and she couldn't make herself do it. That was very confusing for her."

Sharene realised that running was Lisa's salvation. "It brings her joy, and I think it adds a wonderful ebb and flow to everyone's life," says Sharene.

And finally that April, Lisa got out the stroller. She put Annabella in, and together they set out for a run.

**IN DECEMBER – NEARLY A YEAR TO THE DAY SINCE LISA** stared at a bridge and longed for relief – she disappears into the dark again.

This time, it's for a three hour, predawn run in below-zero weather. Lisa has to get her kilometres in early these days, because in September she and Jay adopted another little girl, newborn Gabriella. Despite her delight at having another child, it's been a difficult year, during which she's had to sort out the ways she will deal with her illness.

"The first step was the hardest," she says. "I had to look in the mirror at 44 years of age and say, 'you're depressed.'" But she was so impatient to get better, to be Desert Lisa and start winning again, that she went to the opposite extreme. She was prescribed an even stronger antidepressant, which helped ease her gloom but quickened her pulse. By March, she was feeling the urge to run again, but every time she tried her heart would pound wildly.

For the moment Lisa's off antidepressants, which both excites and worries her. She's been regulating her depression with meditation sessions with Sharene, and long kilometres. She also made the tough choice to retire from serious competition. By focusing on fun, instead of finishing times, Lisa hopes to relieve the stress and secret self-doubt that could trigger another plunge. She's also begun training other runners suffering from depression; and estimates that the majority of women she now coaches have struggled with the disorder.

"It's going to be a challenge," says Lisa. "But I'm focusing on baby steps, small tangible goals."

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**WHAT'S NEXT?** While her competitive days may be over, Lisa still wants to push her running limits. She's planning to run the Badwater twice.