

# Tragedy and fate molds a champion

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The two-year period from 1999 to 2000 was arguably the most important in champion triathlete Chris McCormack’s life.

“That single moment in my career made me a great champion because I left my country and said ‘I will never represent Australia again,’” he says.

Considered the top triathlete in Australia at the time, and the world number three (former number one), ‘Macca’ had just come off of a top finish at the Tokyo Olympic time trials and, in his mind, had qualified for one of the three spots on the Australian triathlon team for the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Just two years before in 1997, he had become the first male to ever win both the ITU Triathlon World Championships and ITU Triathlon World Cup. Surely, his dream to compete in the Olympics were near.

But a phone call with his brother brought him back to Australia – his mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer and given three months to live.

For a week straight, the future executive chairman of Thanyapura Sports and Leisure Club in Phuket spent the day along his dying mother’s bedside, sharing tales from his travels of the past few years.

“I probably spoke more to my mom that week than I did in years because I was travelling, racing,” he says.

“We talked about a lot of things. I told her she had to hang around, I was heading to the Olympics. I’m the best in the world at something. She was really proud.”

After a week, his friend Michael Gilliam, now Thanyapura CEO, invited McCormack out to dinner to get his mind off things.

That was the night he met Emma, a young woman who wouldn’t give him her phone number unless he dropped by the dress shop where she worked later that week.

“‘Make the effort’ I remember she told me,” he says smiling.

Unfortunately, McCormack’s mother succumbed to the cancer the next day.

Despite this and against the advice given by his father, McCormack still went to the Australian Olympic trials in South Korea, which took place less than a week after his mother had passed.

In a heated neck-and-neck race in the cycling portion, McCormack was close to a second-place finish, when he heard someone from the crowd shout out, “Hey Macca, do it for ya mum.”

“I just stopped, in the middle of the Olympic trials, pulled up on the side of the road and cried.

“All the cameras were there, and I just got all my stuff, climbed the fence and went home,” he says, “just right there all on TV.”

Two weeks later, the Australian Triathlon Federation announced their roster without McCormack, passed over for the Olympics due to a policy that stated all athletes must not go home until the trials are over.

Though he was named to the reserve team, he took it as an offense. He filed for an exemption to the rule, but was immediately denied.

“They said my head wasn’t in the game,” he says about the period, which was still eight months before the Sydney games.

“I single-handedly went on a rampage to beat every single Australian athlete after that. It wasn’t their fault. I became quite famous for it, this chip I had against my federation.”

The decision prompted McCormack to pack his bags and move to the United States, vowing never again to represent Australia.

Shortly before the infamous breakdown in front of the cameras, on the night of his mother’s funeral, McCormack went out for a drink with some family members and bumped into Emma once again.

As luck would have it, McCormack’s mother had been Emma’s netball coach years before. The two chatted and, before long, started dating.

Four years later in 2003, McCormack worked up the courage to propose to her. He pulled out the ring and popped the question, but she said ‘No!’



“Then she said, ‘no, yes! I’m sorry, continue,’” he says, “I planned for it to be romantic but it was quite stumbly really.”

In the ten years since they have been married, McCormack has been able to win the US Triple Crown (the first man to do it in a decade) and the 2007 and 2010 Ironman World Champi-

onships while welcoming three kids to their family.

Now, settled in Phuket and heading one of the regions best athletic facilities, he looks back at those years in awe.

“I often say ‘One amazing woman left my life, another just dropped in front of me’, it was meant to be,” he says, “I’m sure it was destiny.”



(Above) Former world number one ranked triathlete, now executive chairman of Thanyapura Sports and Leisure Club, Chris McCormack, wins the 2010 Ironman World Championship.

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