



# UNLOCKING

## the true potential of the human spirit

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**D**ave Jacka is one of the most inspiring people you will ever meet. He is an adventurer about to embark on a journey of a lifetime - kayaking along the Murray River from Lake Hume to the Sea - and is on a mission to smash stereotypes.

From the moment I met Jacka, I was in awe of his spirit and his no-limits attitude to life. He lit up the room, and his positivity was infectious. He was so happy, smiling and upbeat.

Spend some time with him and his attitude starts to rub off. You can achieve

anything that you put your mind to. There are no obstacles too large. There are only problems with solutions. There are solutions for everything.

The catch - Jacka is a quadriplegic with only 6% physical function.

Jacka was an apprentice carpenter, a surfer and skier, with the world at his feet. He was 6'3, outdoorsy, practical and virtually invincible. But all that was about to change.

One winter's night, on the 10th of July 1988, just four days before his 20th birthday, Jacka's world changed radically.

While on his motorbike, on a cigarette run, he misjudged a turn, his motorbike hitting the gutter, plunging him head first into a tree. "Proof that smoking is bad for your health" was his wry recollection. Lying beside the bike, spine shattered. "I knew I was in deep shit," he recalls.

He spent the following three months in intensive care, in head tongs and a further six months in rehab. But it wasn't until rehab, that the severity of his accident came to light and the reality of what lay ahead hit home.

"I was in rehab and one day a nurse





wheeled me into a room, positioning me in front of a blue wall. She had left me there to wait for my clinicians. It was then, while staring at the wall, unable to move, that it hit me," he says. "All my hopes and dreams were shattered. I couldn't see what my future would be like. It was the most soul-destroying moment in my life. I lost all hope and I had nothing to live for. I bawled my eyes out. I thought my life was over."

It was a very long and slow process getting back into every day life, and you don't know what you have until it's gone. Independence is something that many of us take for granted. But when it is gone, we start to crave it. That's how it was for Jacka. After the accident he needed help with everything - from eating and brushing his teeth, to getting in and out of bed or the car.

The turning point for Jacka was regaining some of this independence. It took him two years to learn how to move himself in and out of bed. This was the catalyst for his changed attitude. He

realised that you are only limited by what you think you can do. Just by simply starting and then solving problems along the way, you can achieve anything. You don't have to be "just a disabled person in a wheel chair".

"The thing that kept me going was the little, tiny baby achievements that you start doing. I had to learn to feed myself, and to brush my teeth. Over a period of time I got better at that and realised that small achievements and goals gave me hope," he says.

This was only the beginning - the beginning of a life that would inspire so many others. His major achievements include being the first quadriplegic to fly solo in a microlight trike, the first quadriplegic to fly solo around Australia, as well as representing Australia in the 1996 Paralympic Games.

Next on his list of big adventures is the Paddle Wheel Murray River Expedition. On March 1, Jacka started paddling his modified kayak from Lake Hume to the Sea. That's 2,200 long and winding

kilometers that is set to take an estimated three months.

Jacka has spent the last two years planning for this event - from working out how to modify his equipment, and working out how to get down the Murray (he had to factor in the conditions and terrain - the river is not very wheelchair friendly), to working out what support he will need. It was a long, meticulous process planning for this expedition.

Modifying his kayak to suit his disability involved a lot of planning, trial and error, making little tweaks and alterations along the way. Some of the modifications included pulling the original seat out and replacing it with a special seat to minimise pressure sores. He also had to install a higher backrest and side supports to keep him balanced and prevent him falling out. To provide stability while in the kayak, Jacka had two outriggers mounted on the rear compartment hatch.

Steering was something else Jacka had to consider. To help him steer the kayak along the bends or to avoid other rowers on the river, he had a modified rudder installed. A rudder is typically operated using the feet. Jacka had it modified adapting the sip/puff technology he has used in his Jabiru aircraft, using 'a small electric actuator and 12 volt battery to power it'. "Sipping (on a little plastic tube attached to the rudder) turns the rudder left, puffing turns it right. It's really easy and works a treat!" he exclaims. Paddling was made possible by wearing gloves and taping his hands and fingers to the paddle with duct tape. "The simplest ideas are usually the best," he says.

## SUPPORT CREW

Rarely, if ever, do we achieve anything alone, in isolation. It's important to have good people around you, whether it's to help you get through difficult times or to overcome challenges. This is true when training and preparing for any major event. Supportive family and friends make the journey much easier, especially when the going gets tough.

Jacka testifies to the importance of having positive support around you: "It makes things a lot easier."

His support crew for this expedition is made up of 15 people, mostly volunteers, including a support kayaker, a support boat driver, a carer, a back up boat driver, ground crew (his parents) and his





supportive wife. "There are amazing people out there that (are willing to) donate their skills and time. If it wasn't for the team, this wouldn't be happening," he stresses.

### CHALLENGES

Most athletes will testify to the fact that planning and training for a major event is not all-smooth sailing. There are many challenges and obstacles along the way. But this is what makes achieving goals and getting across that finish line - whether it's a physical finish line at the end of an Ironman or a metaphorical finish line at the end of a 2,200km journey - worth it.

For Jacka, the journey has been no different. Some of the challenges when preparing to kayak along the Murray River included "getting fit enough" for the expedition. This involved logging some serious hours on the Yarra, along with strength training and hand cycling.

Controlling body temperature is important for all endurance athletes. Overheating can make even the best-laid plans come undone every quickly - just speak to any athlete who has raced in the extremely hot, humid conditions in Kona, Hawaii. Athletes racing in the heat typically implement cooling strategies

such as avoiding dehydration and cooling the body with ice and water.

This is even more important for an athlete with a spinal cord injury (SCI). Evaporative cooling from sweating in athletes with SCI is reduced, which makes it difficult for athletes with SCI to control body temperature and to manage heat. Active cooling strategies implemented by Jacka include being sprayed down regularly by his carer, while paddling, wearing appropriate clothing and paddling in the shade if possible. "If temps exceed 30 degrees Celsius, I need to stop because I can't keep cool," he says.

Other potential challenges for Jacka include fatigue, pressure sores, accessing the river and river conditions. "There are a lot of unknowns," he admits.

### DAVE'S MISSION

While he's not raising money for a charity, he is raising awareness. With an incredible passion for life, his mission is to smash stereotypes, to open peoples' minds to what someone with a disability can do. "I have learnt that there's very little I cannot do," he reveals. "It's important to take opportunities and be open to where the journey is going to take you."

His mantra is never give up, be

persistent and stick with it. "We all have the ability to unlock the true potential of the human spirit," he says.

What's next on his to do list? "I'd love to hand cycle (across) India," he laughs. **AT**

## Extra reading and info

You can follow Dave's journey as he meanders around the bends of the Murray River by reading his weekly blog <http://davejacka.com/blog/>. For more on Dave Jacka, his adventures and how you can get in touch with him, check out his website [davejacka.com](http://davejacka.com) or follow him on Facebook @dave.jacka