



NO EXCUSES!

You've seen him
inspire the Biggest Losers.
Now he's ready to
change YOUR LIFE.

COMMANDO STEVE

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1. THE STARTING LINE

OK, let's start the journey of Commando Steve. I was born in Queensland in 1976. My father took off when I was very young so it was just me and Mum. Then Mum married Evan Willis and that's when I became Steve Willis. The family expanded and I became the eldest of four boys.

I had quite a hard upbringing, but that's the sob story of lots of people. Like anything, there were good times and bad times when we were kids. We didn't have much and if you wanted something you had to work for it. Dad – as I called my stepfather – was a small-engine mechanic and had a repair shop. He worked with chainsaws, mowers, brush cutters and the like. He was a capable guy and he'd work his backside off to keep a customer happy.

My parents were very religious so we went to church regularly. There was a lot of discipline at home. It was strict, or at least it felt like it at the time. We were in bed early, we had dinner at the dining-room table and had to eat properly with our knives and forks and not talk. No alcohol in the house. We weren't allowed to just hang out like a lot of our mates used to do. Being the eldest of four boys meant I had to take on responsibility for my brothers, and Dad's values helped me to develop a strong work ethic from an early age. I rode a

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BMX and the older guys would pass me on their mountain bikes and racers. This really pissed me off. I'd say to myself, 'Wait till I get my mountain bike. No one is ever going to pass me again.' I worked a paper round five days a week before and after school and saved up for the bike I wanted. I guess I was competitive early on.

Mum was into horseriding and when I was 12 she hurt her back. She had an operation and was put into a body cast for about 3 months and couldn't do anything. With Dad working I looked after my brothers and the house. Mum relied on me. So I've had this mindset about making my way and being responsible from the start. Most of the decisions I've made and most of the things I've done, I've done on my own. Dad's work ethic really helped me in my late teens, in the military and beyond. He was a hard-arse but I would be a completely different person if he hadn't been that way.



So, where in my childhood did my love of being physically active come from? Who knows? I was an early mover as a little fella and grew into a boisterous kid. My family tell stories about me – apparently I used to bounce off the walls. I suppose I was hyperactive. I know I had a short attention span. I was good at school but I was mischievous as well. I couldn't sit still. I would be forever daydreaming about what I was going to do when I grew up.

More than anything I loved watching Nine's *Wide World of Sports* at the weekend. I loved sports, all sports. I remember the cycling and the motor racing on that show and I especially liked the bodybuilding – Mr Olympia and all that, with Arnold Schwarzenegger. I wanted to be him. Mum would come home with all the shopping, 4 growing boys, 6 of us, so there was a fair bit of food. She would buy those 2-litre cans of Golden Circle pineapple juice that you had to pierce and pour

into a big container. They were heavy for me as a kid and I used to pretend they were weights.

I never participated in sport outside school. As there were 4 of us and we couldn't afford much and Mum had limited time for driving us all around, it just wasn't possible. I did athletics at school and I also played football, but that became a problem. I would get pretty aggressive on the field. I'm quite a placid person, but when I was playing football I'd get all fired up. I'd play hard and if I felt someone did something wrong by me I'd let them know and there were altercations and the like. Mum says I'd be really rough with my brothers when I got home after a game, so my parents and the school forbade me from playing.

Despite not pursuing a sport in a structured way, I was an active and adventurous kid. Looking back, pretty much anything I tried to do, I could do it. And I was fit. With the BMX and the paper round

and riding to school and everywhere, Dad calculated I used to cycle approximately 400 kilometres a week because we lived about 8 kilometres out of town. I even rode around for a bit with a broken hand. I was playing cricket in a mate's backyard. There was cyclone fencing with a big steel pipe and mesh underneath it at about hip height. My mate hit the ball into the next-door neighbour's yard and I jumped the fence to get it. I turned around to throw it back and the fence was right there. As I threw the ball my hand smashed on the fence. Gee, it hurt. Steel and bone do not mix.

Anyway, I cycled home, slept that night, rode to school the next day. Went to the doctor that afternoon: 'Yeah, your hand is broken.' It had to be put in a splint and then a bandage, but I was still riding to school every day.

At the age of 15 I started training at a gym. There

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were these friends of my parents, the Bertrams, who lived across the way. He was a bodybuilder who competed at state level or something, and he was a big guy. He and his wife took me under their wing and I'd go to the gym with them 3 times a week. They would pick me up, or if I met them there for a session after school, they would throw my pushbike in the back of the ute and drive me home afterwards.

I was really committed to my training. I was obsessed; I just wanted more. Right from the start I'd always want to push myself harder. When I was 16 I was the size and weight I am now. I was training with someone who was 23 and a competitive kickboxer. A guy of that age is pretty egotistical – he's in his prime – but he must have seen something in me to want to train with me. We were nuts, we'd just kill ourselves with the stuff we'd do. I remember riding home once and my arms were so sore I couldn't put my hands on the

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handlebars. I had to cross my arms across my chest because my triceps were on fire.

About then we moved up to the Wide Bay area. I wasn't very happy about it. I didn't talk much for a while there and Metallica *Black* played a big role in my life.

At the annual athletics day at school the call went out for volunteers for the 100-metre race because the top runner had left and joined the military. I said, 'Yeah, why not, I'll give it a run.' I hadn't run for years, I was just doing my training at the gym and riding everywhere. But I won. I ran the 100 metres in 11.4 seconds, which is pretty darn quick. I blew everyone away.

After that I was put on the school team and we went to a meet in the Wide Bay districts to compete against other schools. I rode my pushbike there as usual. When I got there I ran the 100

metres and was placed fourth. In the shot-put I was placed first or second. Then they were calling for runners from our school for the 400 metres and I thought, 'What the hell.' That was an experience and a half. I remember coming around the corner – I can picture the track – and I almost passed out before the finishing line. I had nothing more to give. I fell over the line as another kid went past me. At that moment I realised how hard a 400-metre race is. Later I rode back to my girlfriend's house thinking I had never pushed myself that much before. I was sick for a couple of weeks afterwards.

At the same time, it was fantastic. I had a real sense of accomplishment and amazement. What got me was that I'd achieved more than I thought I was capable of. I tried to figure out how I had managed to run quicker than before, other than by developing physically from the work at the gym. All the squats and lunges and general training had

given me more lean muscle mass to perform well across various events. But one thing I've taught myself is not to go too deep into things, because you can think and think and think and it just explodes and you get in a tither. Accept things, have a simple understanding and move on.

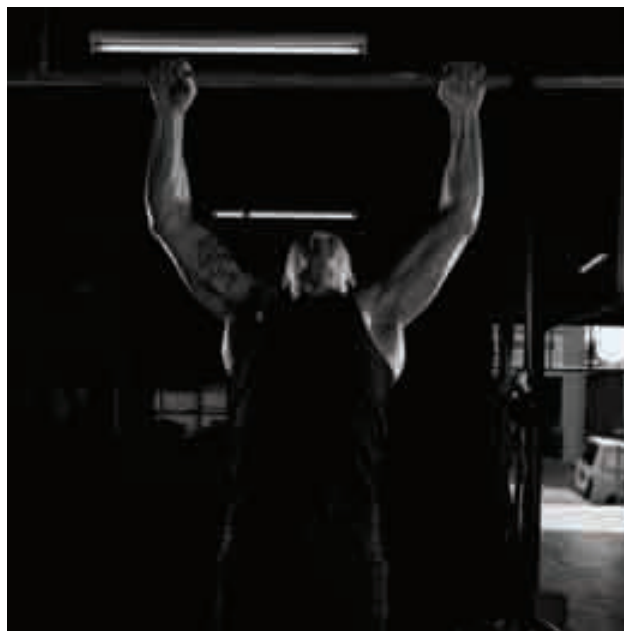
The pain of pushing myself to physical limits was one thing. But I also learned the hard way about the part diet plays in a healthy body. From the age of 14, from time to time I endured excruciating pains in my stomach. The first time it happened was at a birthday party where I had eaten a sausage. I was pacing around and Mum was concerned because she didn't know what was going on with me. Another time I had an attack after eating some yoghurt. I can remember lying with my knees up to my chest, crying and gritting my teeth.

Turns out it was gallstones. There was 1 or more blocking my bile duct so I couldn't digest fat

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properly and that's what led to the attacks. The condition is not related to diet necessarily. Don't get me wrong – Mum was a fantastic cook. She'd serve up steak and vegetables, big salads – great, plain and simple meals. Sorry, Mum. There were males to feed and it was almost a competition between us who could eat the most. I'd always be trying to sneak food because I was worried I would get into trouble for eating too much. It was a bit of a contentious issue, how much food I used to eat. But what we ate at home was healthy and low in fat and not the cause of my gallstones.

It's a rare condition in young people and for whatever reason, the specialist decided to remove my gallbladder rather than dissolve the stones. So, I had it out when I was 18 and it was a really painful procedure. I've been fine since, but it was one of the experiences that shaped me. To this day I have been super-strict about my nutrition.



By this time I had left home. When we moved I'd found a gym near where we lived and started training there. The guy who owned it used to be in the Special Operations Group in Victoria years ago when the Hoddle St massacre occurred. The gym was in the old State Electricity Board building. He and his wife and kids lived in an apartment on the third level and they had a spare room. I wanted some independence, so I moved in, even though I was still at high school. I went to school from there and I trained.

When I was 18 I started working security at a nightclub down the road and then I moved down to Hervey Bay. I lived there for about 6 months. I avoided home as much as possible and trained and worked. Though I had taken the big step of leaving and I had finished school I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. Kids who I had been at school with were going to university, they had direction and structure. I considered being a builder, but I didn't want to move to Brisbane to do an apprenticeship.

Who did I know in Brisbane? I was very self-reliant, and I didn't like the idea of having to ask people to give me a hand to get started in a new place on my own.

It was 1994, the time when apprenticeships were harder to come by than they are these days. Now the educational authorities realise how important it is to fill the jobs of the baby-boomer plumbers and electricians and builders who are retiring, but back then I had to look for the 'next best thing'. And the next best thing for Steve Willis was the military. Give me some structure.

Of course, I didn't know what to expect from it. I had a talk to someone Dad knew who had been an engineer and I decided I'd also go to the engineers (although later I found out that the guys who put you through the training decide where you go). And that was it. I did my aptitude test – yes, you passed – and recruited and got my date for enlistment: 16 May. Mum's birthday.





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MARGARET WILLIS SAYS...

It was just Steve and me at first. He was a boisterous boy, but kind and empathetic. He loved his baby brother. I woke up once and the baby wasn't in his bassinet. He had been crying and so 4-year-old Steve climbed on a chair to pick him up and comfort him. Andrew started walking at around 9 months, which could create chaos, and little Steve would pick up all the books Andrew pulled off the bookshelves. Later they would both keep the younger boys in line.

Steve didn't require much encouragement, he was always very self-reliant. He would organise everyone and help around the house as much as he could. He would even offer to give me his birthday money. He called Evan 'Dad', which helped to pull the family together. They would do jobs together, like they sanded and painted the house. His real father showed up again when he was about 14, but Steve didn't show much interest in having a relationship with him.

He was always sporty and highly active. He used to play tennis on Saturday mornings with a friend, Ian, and, of course, he rode his pushbike 8 kilometres to school and back each day. When he was at high school he had to ride even further. He was an adventurous kid: once when he went canoeing with a friend they canoed all the way out to sea; about a 3-hour paddle.

Steve is a strong person and I leaned on him. It was horrible when he left home. I had a bit of a breakdown. My husband was on sickness benefits at the time and I was working part-time because we were having some financial difficulties. It was an awful period.

Steve was good with his hands when he was at school. He made me a beautiful clock in his woodwork class. We thought joinery was a possible career for him – something specialised, of course. I didn't worry about him going into the military until the Australian defence forces got involved in Iran and Afghanistan. And now we're getting used to the fact he's so well known!



