

Heaven Sent

Bloody hard work – Mick loved it.

When it came to training and physical exercise Michael Ange was old school: ‘*No Pain No Gain*’ was Mick’s mantra. And there was no place better in Port Stephens, or ‘Paradise’ as the locals call it, to test your physical and mental strength than the one kilometre long and 161 metre vertical climb at the entrance to the port known as Tomaree Headland. The volcanic andesite rock was hardened and resistant to time – just like the die-hard group of athletes and health nuts that regularly tackled the track, either running it once or walking it multiple times.

‘Walking is for the weak’ Mick scowled at his derisive golf mates. Having just turned 70, Mick rejoiced in the title of Tomaree’s ‘oldest runner’.

The golf boys had chipped in and bought their septuagenarian mate the perfect birthday presents. Well, perfect for Mick anyway; a pair of fluoro yellow K-Swiss running shoes and an equally garishly coloured Fitbit watch, latest technology. The Fitbit measured everything from steps taken, altitude gained through to kilojoules burned per minute.

But the only number that mattered to Mick was pulse rate, and just how high he could push it.

Mick delighted in explaining to his less athletic, schooner drinking, 9 holes-in-a-golf cart mates that one’s theoretical maximum heart rate when exercising is calculated as ‘220 minus your age’. In Mick’s case that was $220 - 70 = 150$. But going up those final, steel stairs at the top of Tomaree it wasn’t unusual for the Fitbit to ‘max out’ at 173.

‘173, that’s the maximum heart rate of a 47-year-old’ Mick would crow. ‘I’m fitter, stronger and better now than when I was 50.’ The boys just laughed, but Mick believed it.

Sunday on Tomaree was to be avoided. Mick didn’t welcome company. Obese tourists collapsed into, then overflowed, the wooden bench at the first rest stop – time for a breather, a complaint and a cigarette. Whinging fat kids morphed into backpacks, carried by whinging even-fatter parents. Barefoot, boofhead teenagers ouch, winced and hopped their way over the unforgiving andesite path. To Mick, these were not people, they were obstacles – reducing speed and reducing pulse rate – not good.

And the upside to the Sunday run? The athletic women – fit, young and all wearing the ubiquitous uniform of the female athlete, black tights. A sage among Mick’s golf mates had given the subject of women in tights a lot of consideration and standing upon the 9th tee once decreed: ‘Those young girls are way fitter than an old bloke like you Mick. Don’t try keeping up’. But Mick, who had seen a few pairs of tights run past him over the years on Tomaree, disagreed. After all he wasn’t an ‘old bloke’ anyway, he had the body of a 47-year-old, the Fitbit said so. Mick, aged 70, still saw himself as an eligible and fit bachelor. Dream on.

Whew! Bent over, gasping for air, Mick glanced at his pulse rate on the Fitbit watch - 182. Must be a reading error. It had been a very fast, tough run, one of his best ... but 182? Micked pressed the reset and remeasure button, sure enough, 1 ... 8 ... 2. Quick calculation ... now I'm as fit as a 38-year-old. An ecstatic Mick let out a 'whoop'.

'Good run Michael?'

Hands on knees, temple veins pulsating, *still* gasping for breath, Mick saw her running shoes first. Raising a dizzy head, Mick spied a pair of long legs, those black tights, a set of washboard abs beneath a straining tank top that looked a size or two overwhelmed. An angelic face was crowned by a mane of wild, blond hair. Her blue eyes were simply stunning.

'Wow ... er, I mean, hi. Do I know you?' asked a besotted Mick.

'I'm Angela. Come here sometimes. Been keeping an eye on you lately as you charge up this hill'.

Chest swelling with pride, stomach suddenly sucked in Mick boasted: 'Just did my best run ever, pulse rate 182 at the top'.

'That's impressive. I thought you were *extra* pushing it today.' Angela admired the sweat-covered older man, beaming smile on his face, simply doing what he loved to do.

Gazing towards Fingal Spit, a treacherous, wave-washed stretch of ever-changing beach sand, Angela offered almost rhetorically:

'That Spit is really dangerous. I get a lot of work over there'.

How does this gorgeous looking late 20 early 30 something know my name? Wonder what she does? The Fingal Spit comment, her obvious fitness and the blond hair all pointed to one thing - Angela being a Lifesaver and probably based at the Fingal Surf Club.

'This view from Tomaree is memorable Mick, but we've both seen it many times now'. Angela reached out and gently took Mick's hand. 'Let's go,' Mick heard her say seductively. Was that a twinkle in her eye?

Mick could not believe his ears, or his luck.

'Let's go?' She's taken my hand. Wow, this really is Paradise. Mick on first sight had immediately *thought* about asking this Tomaree Angela to join him for a coffee, but naturally had concerns about their age difference. Maybe now was the opportunity to ask. After all, the Fitbit confirmed he was as fit as a 38-year-old, forget that the calendar said 70.

Crying? A crackling static-like sound? Mick's angelic thoughts were interrupted by a woman sobbing, a two-way radio, muffled voices. Mick stared down at the steel platform below, part of the path to the summit. Angela had no need to look. A small crowd huddled around two men dressed in orange overalls - Paramedics.

A plastic sheet concealed a body from the public. Face covered, wisps of grey hair atop a balding head blew in the light southerly. An escaping sole – the bottom of one yellow K-

Swiss running shoe – protruded from the sheet. Beside the stretcher a wrinkled and age-spotted hand lay lifeless. Must be some old bloke.

The Fitbit read zero.