

My Biggest Challenge



Doing the double: Brave Sally Wood has overcome breast cancer and manic depression to achieve her goals. (Picture by Adrian Miller, 0255462)

WHEN Sally Wood heard she had breast cancer she was angry. After years of healthy living and sporting achievement it was the last thing the former national badminton champion expected. But then she decided to do what she's always done best - take on the competition and beat it. That was only last year, but today Sally's game plan is working. Not only has the determined mum defied the disease, she has triumphed in a completely different sport. Now the badminton medals in her living room are jostling for pole position with her latest trophies, a string of showjumping awards. It's all a far cry from the dark days last year when Sally was diagnosed with breast cancer and feared the worst. And as well as facing up to

She's one of Guernsey's favourite sportswomen, who overcame the greatest challenge of her life - cancer. Here, Sally Wood shares the story of her recovery and the healing power of her will to win. By Suzanne Heneghan

family talent didn't stop there. Brother Mark picked up four gold medals in the same sport at the Island Games. But it was Sally who gained the clan's guttering prize when she was crowned



Flying the Flag: Proud Sally holds the Guernsey flag at the Island Games closing ceremony at Cambridge Park (Picture by Adrian Miller, 0009170)

of hard work and commitment. Since the age of 19, when she married her first husband, Andy Podger, Sally had worked tirelessly to achieve her sporting dreams. A professional player until 25, she trained for five hours a day, six days a week and travelled the world, from Europe to the Far East.

a potentially life-threatening condition in her early 40s, she feared it would also spell the return of an old foe she has fought throughout most of her adult years - manic depression. Now she is sharing her inspiring story to help others see what they can achieve in the face of major physical and mental obstacles.

Born into a badminton-playing dynasty, Sally was always destined to become a star player. Her mum, Pauline Leadbeater, is a former island champion while her late father, Reg, was also heavily involved in the local sports scene. And the

English national badminton champion in 1988. Her win was beamed across TV networks around the world and, coming after the birth of her daughter, Nicola, also made her the first mum ever to collect the title. The victory followed a run of earlier successes, including medals at the Commonwealth Games in 1982. But it was made all the sweeter because she had beaten post-natal depression to be at the tournament, thanks to treatment at Castel Hospital. 'It was a special thing. You could say I triumphed over adversity. I never expected to be able to play again because the psychiatric illness had made me very weak and incapable. I did not expect to be able to function again, let alone go on to win a national title.' Such reserves were rooted in a lifetime

Although she later bowed out of playing singles badminton while at the top of her sport, that gruelling early training was to prove useful in later years. It had required relentless inner strength - the very quality she drew on when diagnosed with breast cancer last February. Not only was Sally faced with the biggest physical challenge of her life, she knew that any such extreme life event could trigger her depression again.

'The first thing I thought of was of my; manic condition. I think I went j through all the normal feelings . j including fear. Then I got angry. I thought to myself, "I don't smoke or drink. I have a healthy lifestyle. Why me?":.'

But the defeatist phase didn't last I and before long her usual "competitive mindset kicked in and Sally came out fighting. 'I adjusted myself and thought "Right, I've got cancer but hopefully all the healthy lifestyle choices I have made will help me beat it". You just have to think and find a way through it. Whatever stage you're at, you have to find a



Riding High: A determined Sally, pictured earlier winning the Le Coin trophy (Picture by Brian Green, 0228484)

strategy of coping. When you're in your early 40s, dying or becoming terminally ill seems like somewhere in the distance. But then suddenly you see it and you have to think about it.' At the time of Sally's diagnosis, the story had broken about TV presenter Caron Keating's long battle with the disease. 'When it was announced that she'd gone on for seven years I thought, 'Hold on, you don't die overnight. So I thought, "How can I best fill those years?"'. The big complication for Sally was that she had two illnesses kicking in at the same time. She had to cope with chemotherapy and medication. 'I was mentally ill and physically ill.



Best Shot: Former national badminton champion, Sally Wood, pictured in 1978 (2377/78)

had trouble sleeping and was on anti-depressants. There were times when I did so many toxins in my body that I couldn't think straight. But I was determined to fight on. I underwent the chemo

The aim, just like the badminton, was that I wanted to be the best I could.' Victories in local horse competitions and in Jersey, including the island's prestigious Liberation show, soon followed. Her proudest moment so far has been winning the Keen Trophy, awarded to the local competitor who gets the most clear rounds in their graded classes. 'It is just brilliant. A year ago when I was starting chemo I never thought I

Lance Armstrong, who battled testicular cancer to go on to win the Tour de France seven times. He is someone Sally clearly admires. 'I think it's because I can understand his drive. It's almost part of the recovery process for him, as it was for me. 'It's also a determination not to be seen as a cancer patient, not even classing yourself as that.' As well as her sport, Sally enjoys her job collecting fees for trust company Investec. And despite a busy family life at her Vale home with her husband John, who she describes as 'a constant support', she is also studying for a degree. Sally admits she is unsure just how hard she will push herself in the future but smiles and

and gradually the mental illness improved.'

There was also another treatment in store - in the shape of her daughter's horse, Bernie. Sally was determined to keep physically fit and started riding last September. And she didn't stop there. When she went away for six weeks' radiotherapy at Southampton she played badminton with her coach's pupils. 'I saw it all as a part of my road back to being fit and healthy. It was my exercise and when I went home at weekends I rode the horse.' Sally had ridden ponies when she was younger but was no expert. However, she was determined to take on the challenge - something she believes gave her a boost, both physically and mentally. 'I wanted to prove to myself I could do it. I knew he was a good little horse. I thought, "all I have to do is sit on him and press the right buttons".'

But it was more than that. Sally was once again a woman on a mission to win. 'I didn't really think of an end result at the time.

would be sitting in this room surrounded by trophies - just like when I was a teenager I did not think I would win 47 caps. That is the wonderful thing about sport and life. I don't see myself as any more talented than anyone else out there. I'm just bloody-minded really. 'I want anyone who has been diagnosed with breast cancer, or any illness and cannot see a way through, to read my story. I am someone who had manic depression and cancer. But I have overcome them and the results have all been clear. 'I am leading a normal life, feel much better, am working and have a room full of trophies. I just want people to think about that. 'Everyone says to be positive and I know that's a bit of a cliché. But what I have done is try to look for some light, something to achieve. 'I did that at each stage of diagnosis -even if it was sometimes just getting up or making a cup of tea.' There are some parallels with cyclist

agrees that yes, she is back. I ask her about her proudest sporting moment and the response is surprising. She says that winning the Keen Trophy is 'up there' with her national badminton trophy. 'That was brilliant because I had fought so much to get there. It will probably be one of the biggest highlights of my career.'

Somehow you wouldn't bet on it.

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Sally and her horse Bernie at Vazon beach are pictured on the front of the Pink Ladies' 2006 fund-raising calendar, priced at £5 and available from all Checkers and Checkers Express stores, Aladdin's Cave, Tozer's on the Bridge and smaller outlets throughout the island.

The group can be contacted at www.pinkladies.org.gg or by email via pinkladies@cwgsy.net. A confidential helpline is also available on 415131