

State's ground-breaking world champion still mapping out a course towards rock and role

Tasmania remains on top of the world

Rob Shaw

HANNY Allston's father told her you need rocks in life.

Whatever you do, wherever you go, you need solid foundations to rely on.

Allston did lots and went far.

Orienteering world titles, athletics championships, state swim teams and phenomenal wilderness achievements; medical, teaching, coaching, retail and public speaking sidelines; homes in Sandfly, Melbourne, Canberra, Auckland and Hobart; and visits to 35-plus countries from Albania to Borneo for competition, recreation, work or vacation.

Throughout it all, Allston said that - along with her family - her home state was her strongest rock.

That relationship shines out from the pages of her newly-published autobiography *Finding My Feet*.

Tasmania's role in creating one its most enduring athletes - still the sole non-European orienteering world champion and only winner of junior and senior titles in the same year - is now being repaid in her role as a tourism and recreation adviser for the state's Parks and Wildlife Service.

Having experienced so much of the world, she is both proud and defensive of her home state's potential.

"I get to go all over the world then come back to Tasmania and realise there's nowhere else like it," she said. "We are so lucky."

"Young Tasmanians tend to leave and return. You'll never crush the gypsy spirit in us, but Tasmania is a place you sometimes need to leave to love. And every time you leave, that love grows stronger."

"I went where the grass got greener. And you can never predict where what you love is going to take you. But over the highs and lows, I learned the importance of having that rock and support network."

With its "cooling forests and people-free beaches",

Tasmania is as much a character in Allston's story as her mother, father and brother, and even sits alongside them in the acknowledgements.

"Whenever I now leave a foreign journey, I become more and more excited about the prospect of returning home to our island Down Under ... you feel like dropping to your knees and kissing the ground in gratitude that you live here," she writes.

"The more I have travelled, the more I have come to realise the extraordinary beauty of our island home. Remote stretches of untouched wilderness, small cities, quaint towns and rich, fertile soils. I am most at home when I am at home."

Growing up on the outskirts of outdoor-loving Hobart, which she dubs "the Chamonix of Australia", Allston enjoyed the most idyllic of rural upbringing in a 19th century farmhouse, eating dinners off a Huon pine table crafted by her grandfather.

"I love that I felt so loved," she continues.

"Every element of my youth at Sandfly was complete ... our home in this steep-sided valley was the pillar that held me steady as I found my growing feet ... Sandfly was my soul."

"We were presented with a childhood so rich in vitamins and playfulness that it crafted a uniqueness in our ability to pursue individual pathways."

As homes, relationships and jobs intertwine, Allston's life story can be neatly compartmentalised into her sporting endeavours, which began with swimming, switched to orienteering and then gradually morphed into marathon and then extreme trail running.

The sport of swimming does not come out of the book well and not simply for the less than fond memories of competing beneath the "dripping, low-slung ceiling" of the Invermay pool.

From just missing national finals representing Tasmania



Hanny Allston atop Mount Anne in southern Tasmania.

to dominating international fields for Australia, Allston relished a transition to what she called the less judgemental sport of orienteering.

"I had gone from being a participant to being a competitor," she says.

"I knew I was finding a true love affair with sport. One where the racing excited me as much as the training. A sport rich in friendships and opportunities. The perfect sport for a child of the wild."

Since accumulating an impressive 68 kilometres when competing at the world rogaining championships at the age of just 10, Allston had been comfortable in the wilderness with a map and compass.

Spurred on by a coach's passing observation: "You are a pretty good swimmer for a runner", Allston dived head first into the sport, driven by the "big, hairy audacious dream" of becoming a junior world champion in Lithuania in 2006 but then adding a senior title just months later in Denmark.

The progression into long distance running saw her claim the Melbourne and New Zealand marathon titles and eventually combined with her "adventure muscle" to branch into trail running.

She was the youngest ever finisher of the Cradle Mountain Trail Run at the age of 18 and returned in later life to knock an hour off the 82km course record in eight hours and 10 minutes.

"I had never felt more alive, nor more certain that I was doing exactly what I

needed to be doing.

"I was 18 years old and suddenly only too aware of the opportunities I couldn't wait to run towards," she writes.

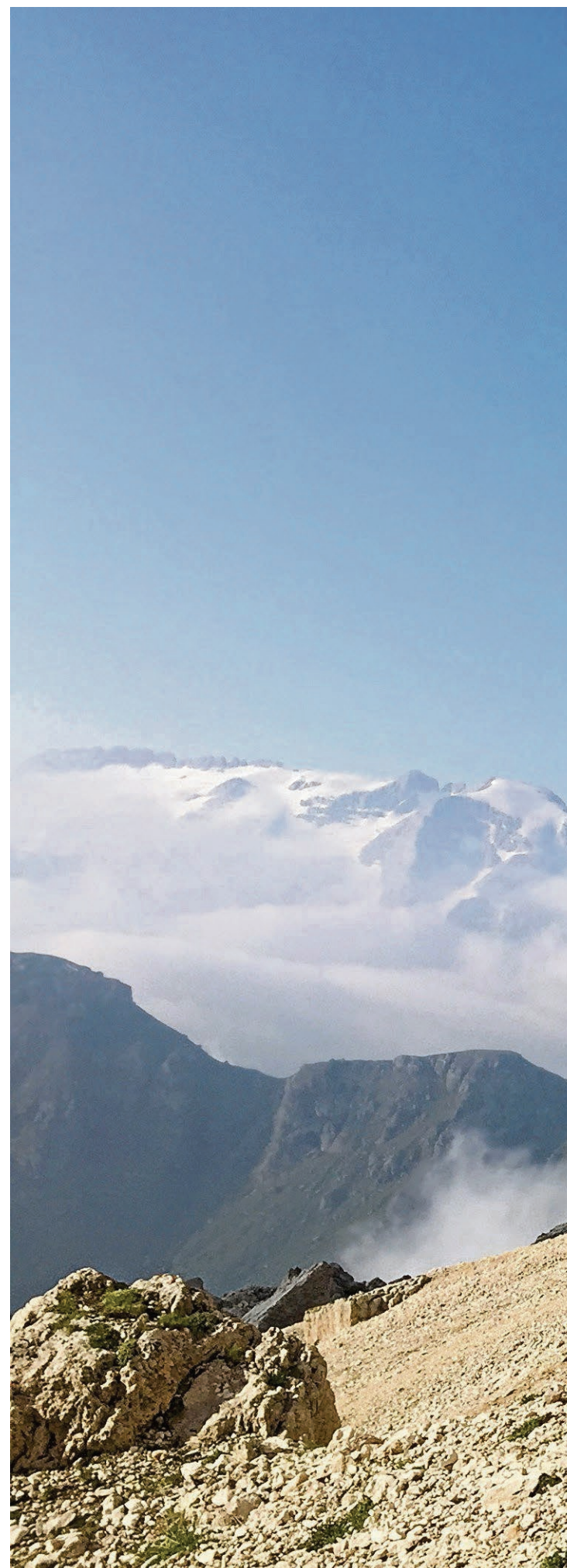
"I found myself rising excitedly above competition. I was in rapture with my running, and there was nowhere that brought me greater joy than roaming a wild trail in Tasmania. I no longer felt the same burning desire to prove myself on a course dictated to me by event organisers."

"From then on, mornings would be opportunities rather than routines. Exercising would be play, not training. I was learning to be wilder and to play wilder, and it felt so damn great."

What followed were staggering, record-breaking single-day trail-running conquests of Federation Peak (43.1km, 11 hours, 26 minutes in "shocking weather and epic mud" but "humbling and great fun"), Frenchmans Cap (45km, six hours, 20 minutes), Western Arthurs traverse (59km, 10 hours, 30 minutes) and the South Coast Track (91.8km, 5859m of climbing, generally regarded as an eight-day bushwalk, featuring a river crossing and a major mountain range which was completed in 12 hours and 20 minutes).

"The Overland Track opened my eyes to this whole new world. It was such a perfect day and planted a bit of a seed in me."

"I found such adventures less pressured than sporting competition. When you go to



Federation Peak, you are not judging yourself by your time or performance, just how amazing it feels to be there."

In the words of her sometime training partner and sporting idol, Lindisfarne's Olympic rowing champion Scott Brennan: "No road to the top is ever without hurdles, it is how you confront those hurdles that determines whether you make it."

Allston faced her fair share of hurdles.

She had to deal with the deaths of her two most trusted coaches, Hobart athletics institution Max Cherry to a heart attack and triathlon world champion Jackie Fairweather to suicide. Of Cherry's unique coaching

philosophy, she writes: "Like oil repels water, Max repelled unnecessary weakness. He would put love in your heart and yet fear into your legs."

If Tasmania is the book's hero, Anorexia is the undoubted villain.

Dominating the section titled "Losing my feet", the eating disorder is portrayed as Allston's unwanted friend who is allowed to reduce her athletic, healthy frame to a 45kg skeleton.

"Anorexia accompanied me on every step of the journey, and I am not proud of holding her hand so tightly," she writes.

Away from sport, the former medical student and schoolteacher has eventually



ROCK STAR: Hanny Allston running through the Italian Dolomites. Pictures: Graham Hammond

settled into a retail career.

The outdoor adventure outlet Find Your Feet, run with husband Graham Hammond, opened in Hobart in 2015 and Kingsway, Launceston, last November.

"We're not just selling a good raincoat, we're selling a way of life. It's such an exciting industry," said Allston, who now has the rare distinction of having won both the Tasmanian athlete of the year (2006) and young businesswoman of the year (2015) awards.

Admitting 34 is a bit young to be writing an autobiography, Allston said: "I always envisaged writing a memoir when I was grey and old but I had been burning to get the

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story out.

"It's never lost on me how fortunate a life I have lived. Both in the people I have met and the experiences I have lived ... from racing in the high mountains of Switzerland to the sweltering tropics of Borneo; from living in the Soviet-infused Ukraine to the schmickness of Norway; from the upset bellies of Nepal and China to eating cake

for breakfast in Italy."

Echoing Brennan's mantra, she added: "There are so many different ways for us all to reach our potential and very rarely are they in a straight line.

"If I can help someone get there earlier without quite as many pitfalls, I'll have achieved what I set out to do."

Finding My Feet is a fantas-

tic book about a fascinating person who achieved phenomenal feats.

Tasmania should be as proud of Hanny Allston as she clearly is of Tasmania.

***Finding My Feet* (\$34.99) will be launched on July 1. Pre-orders can be placed with Petrarch's.**

For more info visit: www.hannyallston.com.au/findingmyfeet



Allston celebrates her 2006 orienteering world title in Denmark. Picture: Julia Hutchinson