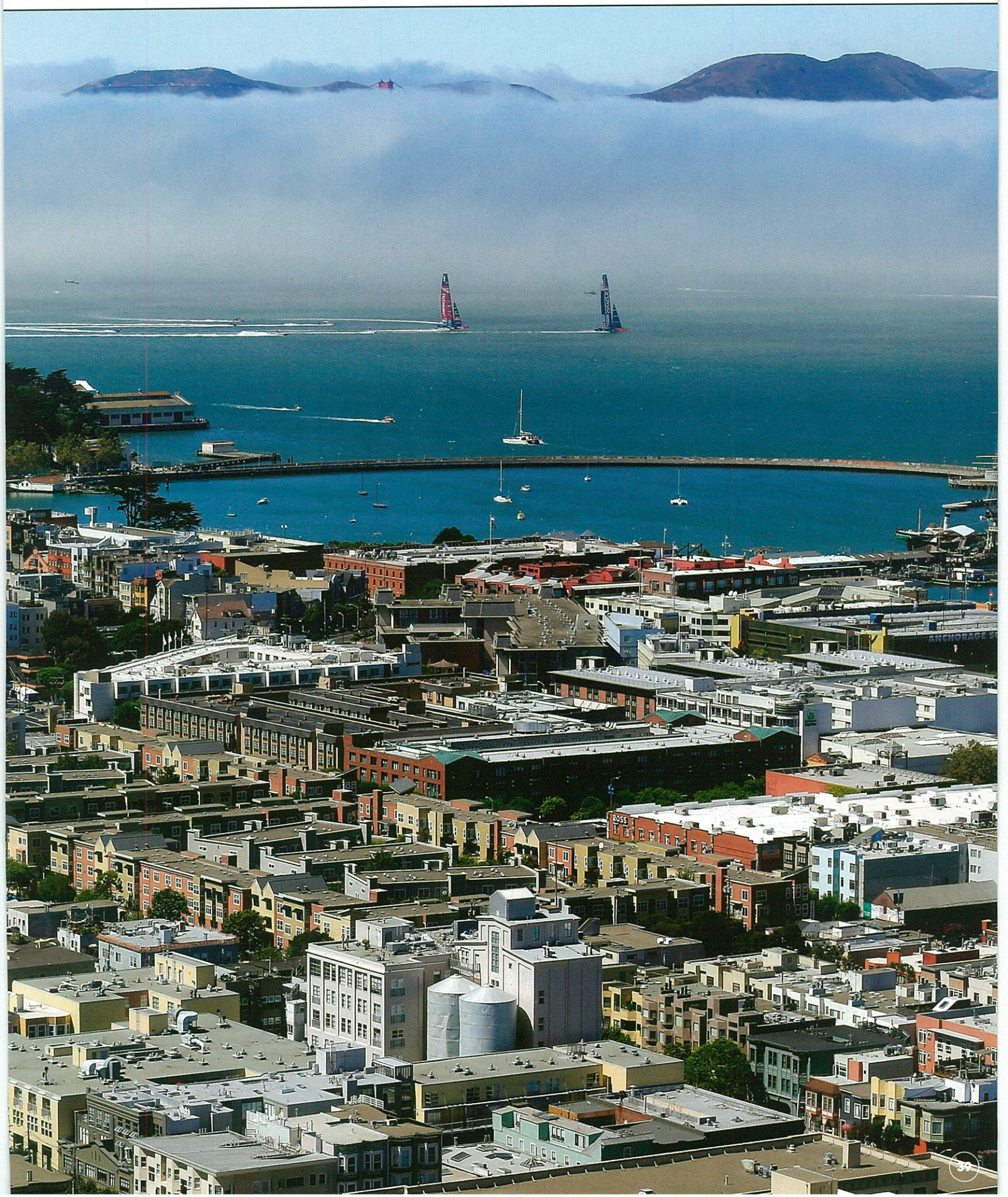


THE SPORT ADDICTION

CAN AN ELITE ATHLETE'S ADDICTION TO COMPETITION TRANSLATE TO A DEPENDENCE ON DRUGS? IT TOOK A PRISON STRETCH AND A STINT IN REHAB FOR FORMER OLYMPIAN NATHAN BAGGALEY TO FIND AN ANSWER FOR HIMSELF.

By **JEFF CENTENERA**

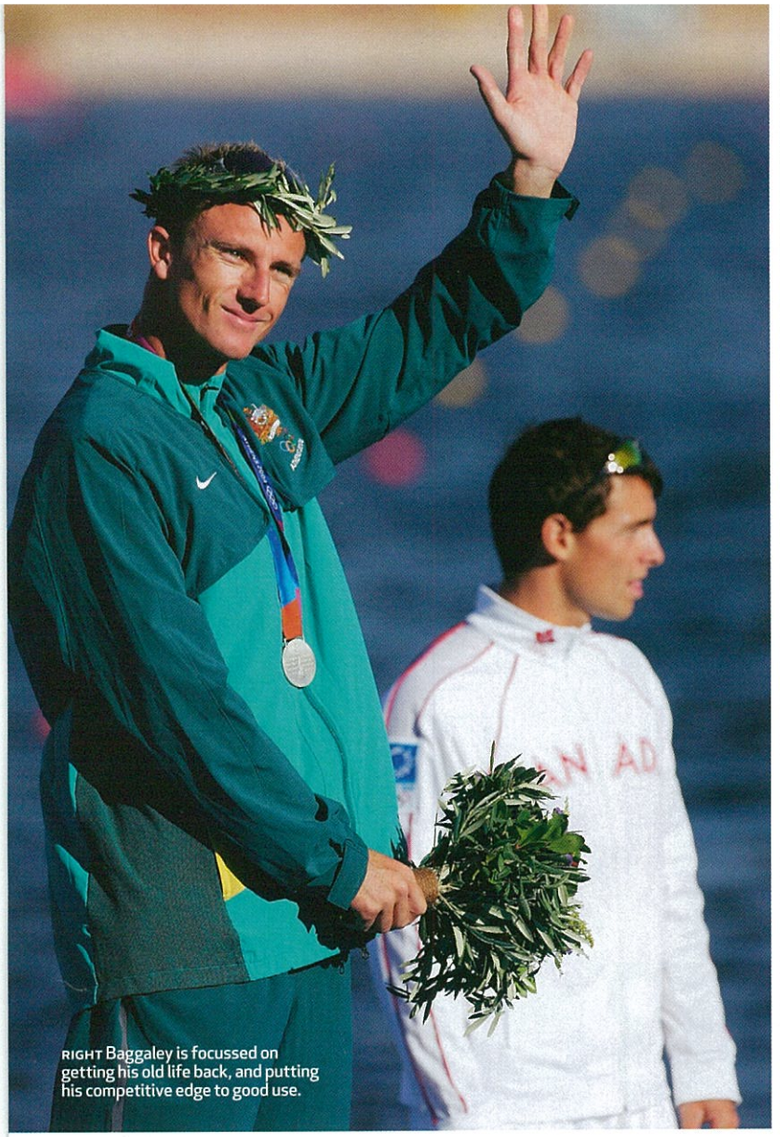
Just over a year after partnering Clint Robinson [LEFT] for a men's kayak sprint Olympic silver at Athens, Nathan Baggaley was up the proverbial creek without a paddle.

PHOTO BY *Getty Images*

The stretch of water between the Hawaiian islands of Molokai and Oahu doesn't lack for cool branding. The "channel of bones", as it's known, dares all manner of open-water adventure across the rough 50 kilometres that separates the small island, famed for its leper colony, from the hub of the archipelago-state. In the world of surf-ski racing, the Molokai Challenge is regarded as the ultimate, enchanting the world's best paddlers over the nearly four decades it has been contested.

In 2005, Nathan Baggaley arrived in Molokai, the latest in a line of Australians to take up the challenge, following the likes of Grant Kenny and Dean Gardiner, both multiple winners of the event. Baggaley had made his name the previous year in Athens, where the already dual world champion claimed a pair of Olympic silver medals in kayak sprints, one individually and the other in a seat behind another of the sport's golden boys, Clint Robinson. Baggaley was later named the AIS' male athlete of the year for 2004. There was no mistaking his star quality – he was a clear-cut piece of bronzed Aussie, straight out of the surf club in his hometown Byron Bay.

For a short-course paddler, however, the channel of bones presented an altogether different arena. It has the feel of being dropped in the middle of the ocean, quite literally. "You start the race and you can't see any land," Baggaley says. "It's just a horizon of water. You're just heading out into the middle of the ocean and you've got to trust the escort driver to point you in the right direction." ▸



RIGHT Baggaley is focussed on getting his old life back, and putting his competitive edge to good use.

"WHEN I LOST SPORT, I BECAME COMPETITIVE IN THE PARTYING I WAS DOING, THE RECREATIONAL DRUGS I WAS TAKING."

Baggaley had only met the man on his escort boat days before. The local fisherman had counselled Baggaley to make an early turn in the race, to get the best downwind line to the finish. He was in the lead when he broke off, and the rest of the field kept going straight. "I was really having doubts," Baggaley says. "I didn't see anyone for a couple of hours. This whole ocean, a couple of hundred paddlers, but I was by myself."

In this expanse, over the three-and-a-half hours the crossing takes, even the most focused athlete's mind will wander. The channel tosses up its own surprises. "I remember I pulled down a big swell," Baggaley recalls. "The water was crystal clear, and I could see this massive shadow. And I knew straight away: this is a shark. Because I was on the swell, I didn't really have much room to move. The wave took me right next to the shark.

"Normally, I see sharks all the time, when you get out there. I'm on a 20-foot ski, they're first reaction is they shit themselves and take off. This thing *didn't even flinch* a bit. It didn't move, and then slowly started to follow me. I'm like, oh no. And I'm yelling out to my escort boat, 'Did you see that shark?' And they're saying: 'It's still there.' I look behind, and there's a 14-foot tiger shark tailing me. I had to connect a few waves to get away. He was just checking me out."

The 2005 race would be remembered for a dramatic finish. Baggaley's lone-wolf act had kept him in the lead for most of the way, until he was joined near the finish by the Molokai Challenge's presiding legend, the South African Oscar Chalupsky. Baggaley was understandably confident that he could beat Chalupsky in any kind of sprint to the line. But the savvy Chalupsky took advantage of the run into Oahu, claiming his 11th win in the event by a couple of minutes, and later described it as one of the toughest.

Having battled through cramps for the last 50 minutes of the race, Baggaley was bullish in the aftermath of his first attempt at Molokai. What ultimately beat him was a lack of experience, and the knowledge he needed to win this race was something that would surely come with time. "At the halfway point, I could make out a silhouette of the island, and you're aiming for somewhere in the middle of it," he says.

"There's no point you can go off, no distinguishing mark, no mountain, nothing. I'm trying to communicate with my escort driver: where on this silhouette do I aim for? Because a couple of centimetres from that distance is kilometres when it's exaggerated."

Metaphor, unmistakably. Nathan Baggaley's first Molokai Challenge would also be his last. He speaks enthusiastically as he reminisces about that time, but it has the bittersweet tinge of a last, happy

memory. This is entirely understandable considering what happened in the years that followed. The lead line from the Hawaiian newspaper's story on the race was unintentionally ominous: "It can be addictive."

For the rest of his days, Nathan Baggaley will carry the burden of being one of Australian sport's profound cautionary tales. It's a story worthy of *Breaking Bad* – instead of a chemistry teacher driven by unfulfilled potential to becoming the meth kingpin of New Mexico, substitute a sporting hero, favourite son of an idyllic Australian beach town, spiralling deeply after career disgrace into abusing, dealing and manufacturing ecstasy.

A mere five months after Molokai, Baggaley was banned from sport after testing positive for steroids. His case was unfortunately novel – his brother Dru, a rugby player, had mixed the drugs into some orange juice, which Baggaley had unknowingly taken from the fridge. The canoeing federation accepted the facts, then imposed a 15-month ban from competition.

Baggaley's later drug problems cast his steroids breach in an even worse light, but he maintains he wasn't cheating in his sport. He had been subject to two testing pools for a decade, both kayaking and surf life saving. The two drugs he tested positive for – stanozolol and methandienone – were, to use his words, "the most prehistoric and detectable thing". He was preparing for kayak's marathon world championships at the time, not exactly the conditions he would need to be adding mass.

In the now well-known formulation of the doping code, the athlete is responsible for whatever goes in. Baggaley was out, and the fine detail fed his sense of victimhood. "My reputation was gone, livelihood, and worst of all, my self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect, everything was gone," he says. "I was left with no phone call, no help, no one rang to see how I was. I was shattered – I had been their star athlete for many years, and when I had a tough time, everyone washed their hands of me.

"It was tough. I had nowhere to go. I found myself in a bit of a hole, pretty bad depression. I never wanted to admit that to anyone. I never wanted to tell anyone – I was this big, headstrong athlete who was renowned for being tougher than anyone – that I was struggling and needed help."

Deprived of sport, Baggaley found his outlet in the party scene. "I'd never touched a recreational drug in my life. And I'd always frowned upon people who did. Then I remember having my first ecstasy – it was, unfortunate I have to say, one of the best nights of my life. I thought, 'Wow, I didn't drop dead, I haven't put some unknown rat poison in my body and dropped sick. I've had the best night of my life, I feel fantastic, I feel confident. I've got all these amazing feelings going on.' And I'm like, 'Wow, I've been frowning on all these people for years. Maybe *I* was the one who was wrong.'

"At the peak of my problems, at my worst, it was four to five nights a week, I guess. And that was for a few months. When you've got huge amounts of ecstasy at your fingertips and large amounts of money being thrown around in front of you, all of a sudden you develop all these 'friends' and become quite well-known … It's a slightly, I don't know, 'exciting' lifestyle. And that's the effect of the drugs as well.

"Looking back, God knows what damage I was doing to myself. The coming down – you'd be up for nights on end, and then you'd sleep for a couple of days. At the time, it was fun and exciting, and people looking in would've thought it was great. But there was a trade-off. There was a price to pay. ▸

LEFT IMAGE BY *Getty Images* RIGHT IMAGE COURTESY *The Cabin Chiang Mai*

After four years in prison, Baggaley took himself to The Cabin Chiang Mai for rehab under the supervision of head counsellor Alastair Mordey (LEFT).

ONE THEORY IS THAT ADDICTION IS AN ILLNESS BASED IN THE BRAIN THAT PRE-EXISTS THE COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOUR.

"Once I had that first one ... I wish I hadn't opened that door. I wanted more, it was the best feeling, and you needed to take more to get the same effect. By the time you're doing some pretty crazy things, I was so desensitised to the whole drug scene it became normal. It didn't seem illegal anymore. It didn't seem like a problem: 'I'm not doing any harm to anyone, no one's dying.' In my head, it's not a big deal. You justify it somehow to yourself. You know it's not right, but you build up justifications and reasons for doing it."

The justifications and reasons piled high – with his brother, Baggaley was eventually running an ecstasy distribution ring that extended to the Gold Coast. It began with a loan to Dru, who was facing financial pressures. Baggaley initially thought he could keep the activities at arm's length, but facing his own money issues because of the suspension, his involvement deepened. In early 2007, he was arrested on the Gold Coast after police found him in a car with more than 750 tablets and $1000 in cash. Later that year, a day before Baggaley was due to depart for Hong Kong and his return to competitive kayaking (his 2005 ban had been extended), police arrested the two brothers, concluding a four-month operation in which they observed them carrying out drug deals. Police seized more than $60,000 in cash and a pill press, which had been used to make almost 15,000 tablets. The prosecution case characterised the brothers as calculating in their activities, describing a world of shadowy meetings held at oyster farms with impressionable surf club youths being used to run drugs. Baggaley was sentenced to nine years in prison, and was released in late 2011, having served four years, including a couple in maximum security. Dru remains behind bars.

"I knew I was doing the wrong thing," Baggaley says. "So I should've paid a price, and I did. I was a profile person, they wanted to make a big deal, they wanted to a make an example [of me].

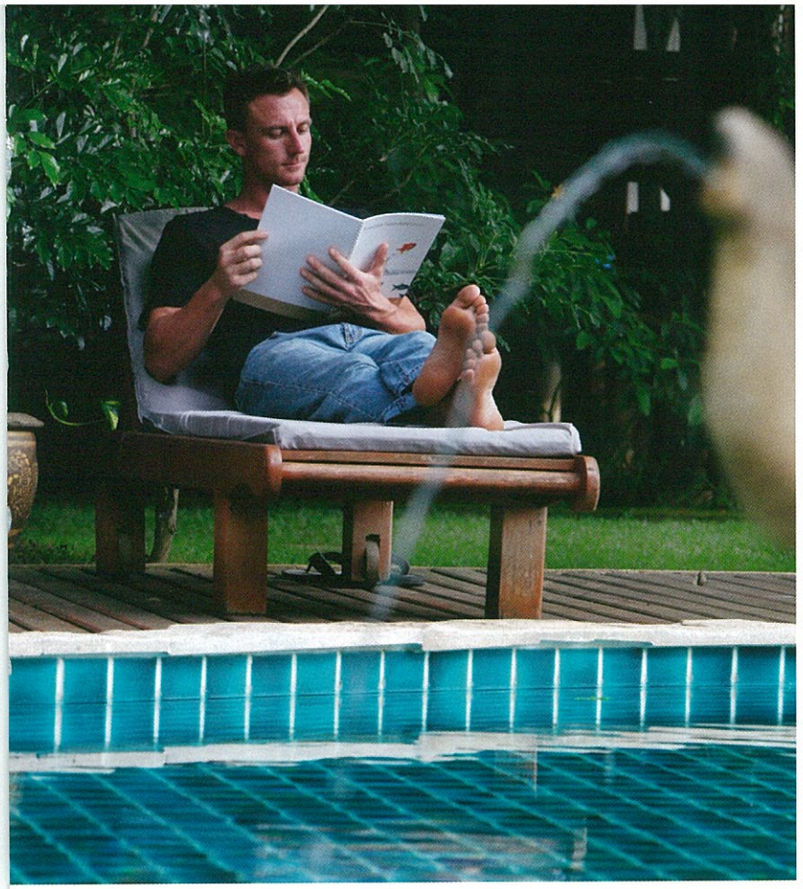
"Myself and my brother, we're not stupid guys. We knew what we were doing was wrong, but if we're going to do something, you don't do it happy-go-lucky. You don't want to get caught. There was that level of, well ... you can't be silly with that. For a while there, we were making good money, living a good lifestyle, living a party lifestyle. But that bubble soon burst, and reality came crashing down on us."

Since his release, Baggaley has gone through the process of rehab, having to think through the fateful turn in his life that led to drug addiction. He's always maintained that being barred from sport was what led him down that dark path – where it once sounded like a self-justification crafted for his legal defence, he's become more convinced of it having served his time.

"I'm a competitor. When I lost sport, I didn't have that anymore." He pauses. "I became competitive in the partying I was doing, the recreational drugs I was taking. I liked to thrive. It's kind of messed up, but at the time, I loved seeing I could push the limits more than anyone else. When you're an athlete, when you've got that focus, it's a great thing to have. When you've got no sport, no direction, no goals, it can get you in trouble. And it got me in a lot of trouble."

In the book *The Sports Gene*, author David Epstein looks at the notion of "natural" sporting talent. A later chapter tackles an intriguing idea: that the desire of great athletes to train and win is as much a physical gift as sharp hand-eye co-ordination or great leaping ability. The book refers to the research of University of California Riverside physiologist Theodore Garland, who has bred mice for greater running endurance. In these long-haul mice, he observed ▸

IMAGES COURTESY *The Cabin Chiang Mai*



THIS SPREAD Rehabilitation for Baggaley has been about a lot more than quitting the habit ...

IMAGES COURTESY *The Cabin Chiang Mai*

THERE IS PLENTY OF EVIDENCE OF ADDICTION RISK IN SPORTSPEOPLE.

not only changes in their musculature, but also brains. Garland then conducted an experiment in which he gave a group of normal-running mice Ritalin, which stimulated the production of dopamine – the chemical in the brain associated with reward response.

Epstein writes: "The normal mice, once doped, apparently derived a greater sensation of pleasure from running, so they started doing it more. But the high runners, when doped, did not run more. Whatever Ritalin does in the brains of normal mice is already occurring in the brains of the high-running mice. They are, quite literally, running junkies."

Preliminary studies of physical motivation in humans indicate something similar going on in our brains. A 2012 study by Justin McNamara and Marita McCabe at Deakin University sampled 234 athletes from the state institutes of sport and found that 34 percent of them exhibited a form of exercise dependence, in which they reported adverse effects if they didn't train. Supreme single-mindedness has long been associated with the great athletes, and it may well be the trait that lifts the merely physically gifted into the realm of sporting star.

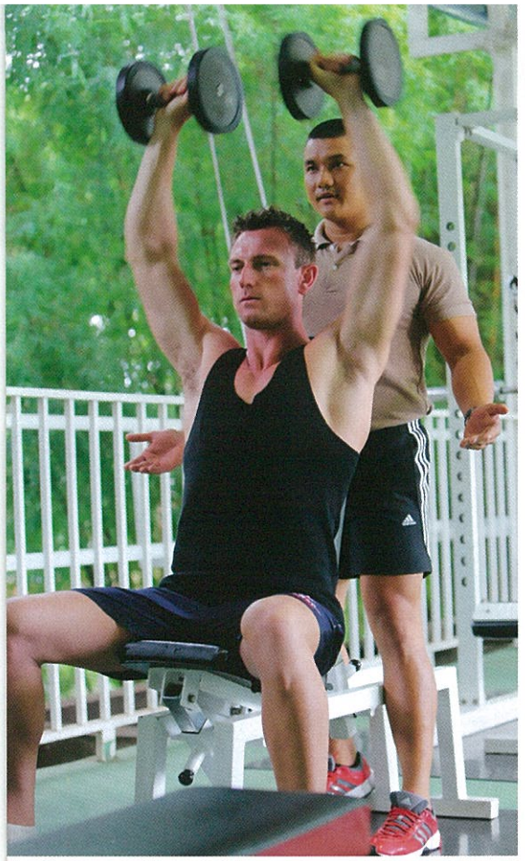
Alastair Mordey sees something familiar in all of this. Mordey is the head counsellor at The Cabin Chiang Mai, a rehab clinic based in Thailand that Baggaley attended. Mordey, a former heroin addict, is an advocate of the theory that addiction is an illness based in the brain that pre-exists the compulsive behaviour. The idea is gaining currency in the drug treatment world, which has long operated from a psychological basis. "To put it bluntly, a lot of addicts will inherit an illness, which makes them ill in terms of feeling rewarded – they feel poorly rewarded by life, or have a blunted pleasure response to life," Mordey says.

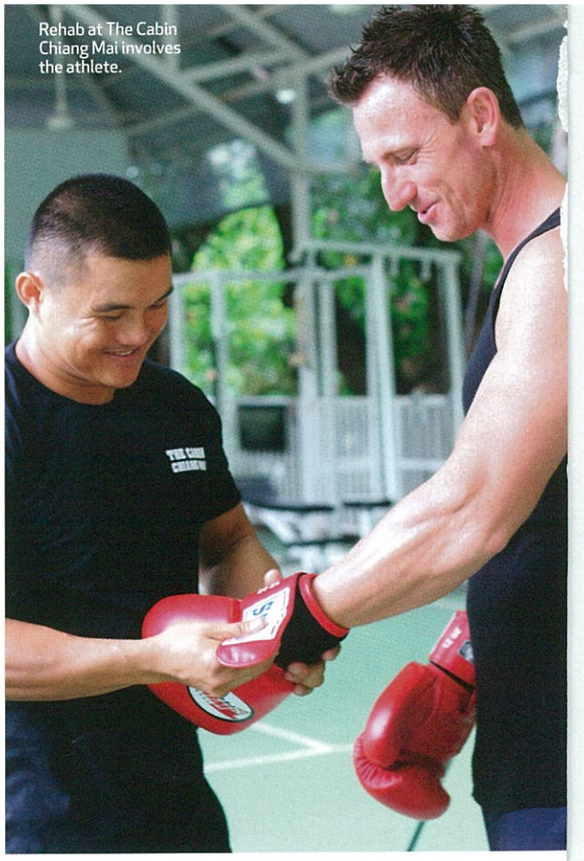
"What they then do is they look for external dopamine reinforcers. Dopamine is the reward chemical that they're deficient in, or is not functioning well. They need things in the external environment to top up, boost or create a better tone of dopamine. Cannabis and alcohol would be two very good dopamine reinforcers, which most ordinary use with this illness would go towards. But there are some people whose background is very structured and geared to things like sports. People who have this illness will throw themselves into sports, perhaps dangerous activities, early sexual acting out – there are lots of behaviours which medicate the symptoms of this poor dopamine functioning as much as there are chemicals."

It's not quite so simple to say that athletes have a personality type that implies addictive behaviour in other areas. (The picture of addiction-as-brain-illness is disputed – it doesn't account for the distinctions between what is considered normal brain function and what is abuse.) But there is plenty of evidence of addiction risk in sportspeople. A recent survey by Britain's Professional Players Federation found that out of 1200 footballers, jockeys and cricketers in the study, 24 percent suffered from mental health or addiction problems. These issues were made particularly acute by retirement from their sport, as they tried to transition to a new field.

"That figure which was quoted, 24 percent, is much higher than the average population," says Mordey, noting the rate generally is about five percent. "That's a lot, when you think five in a hundred people wake up in the morning needing a drink. For 24 out of a hundred athletes, that's more than a link, but it hasn't been heavily researched."

Mordey sees a distinct similarity in the athletes who come to The Cabin to other performers, such as singers, or to workers in high-stress, results-based fields such as finance. The root cause of addiction is common, and doesn't prevent the addict from becoming a high achiever. Perhaps the best example of this in sport is Oscar De La Hoya – a superstar boxer in his day, who pulled off the rare post-career transition to become one of the two most important fight promoters in the game ▸





Rehab at The Cabin Chiang Mai involves the athlete.

"I WANT TO GET BACK TO THE THING THAT KEPT ME OUT OF TROUBLE."

today – he has battled alcoholism and cocaine addiction throughout. Having put together the superfight last September between Floyd Mayweather and Canelo Alvarez, De La Hoya didn't go to the fight, instead checking into rehab. "High-functioning addicts, is what we call them," Mordey says. "Fuelling is what they're doing. But this is the bit that most people get wrong: a high-powered city exec needs cocaine to stay up later and beat the opposition? I would say, no, they were the type of person would would've done cocaine anyway. They are of that disposition, that's why they're in that job. It's not a lower socioeconomic disease. A council estate boy can't get a city exec job, but you'll find he's the most driven drug dealer on his estate ... Addiction is a driven person's disease."

Nathan Baggaley was known within his sport as a manic trainer – Clint Robinson, who enjoyed a notable rivalry with his eventual Athens team-mate during their careers, once marvelled at Baggaley's devotion to regimen. Baggaley says the motivation wasn't external either. After a disappointing showing in the Sydney Olympics, Baggaley made the choice to coach himself. "I had guys coming from other countries to train with me. They were supposed to stay for a couple of months, and they'd leave after two weeks. They couldn't handle the intensity. For me, that was normal, I loved it. When I see them struggle, it just gave me more energy. I feel it separated me from the field, made me the athlete that I was."

Mordey describes Baggaley as a typical profile among athletes falling prey to drugs – a latent addiction that had been "medicated by winning". Reflecting upon that thought, Baggaley agrees there was some kind of addictive nature he was trying to satisfy, although the high of athletic excellence wasn't quite comparable with that of substances. "Different highs. How would you explain it? It's really *hard* to explain – they're totally different feelings, yet similar in rewards for your body. The self-worth, the self-confidence – it wasn't the highs – the feeling of invincibility within myself that I craved. You get those kind of things from drugs, a false confidence, but it's powerful. When you're winning in sport, it's the same thing.

"The reward of winning events is the ... In my sport, I love the pain, knowing that I've survived and pushed and broken so many people in the process. That's what I thrive on. When you'd go out partying, I loved being the last man standing at the end of the night. It's scary. Everyone's wanting to go to bed at 4am, and I'd be having another pill, 'Let's go, we're kicking on.'"

The public consciousness has become acutely aware in recent times of the risk of drug use among athletes, whether it be performance-enhancing or illicit. Baggaley speaks to the subject with a pained consideration. Adamantly against the use of drugs in the way that recovering addicts are, he's also sympathetic to the circumstances of sportspeople and the pressures they're facing. "You get caught up in the scene, and it's very easy for young guys to veer off the track at times. We do need to be aware that they're like any other teenager or young guy, and they're going to be tempted to make silly choices. Recreational drugs in particular, they shouldn't be hung out to dry and be given two-year suspensions straight up for a silly decision while drunk."

Living just outside of Byron Bay and working for a surf-ski firm, Baggaley is back to competing in kayaking, having participated in various offshore series. Now 38, and with his criminal past limiting what he might compete in, the idea of a comeback might be ambitious. But Baggaley will compete, partly for his continued rehabilitation, partly because he knows it's in his own nature.

"A part of me is still curious if I can compete at the top level. I'd love to have that answered, for myself. I'm getting obstacles and hurdles from the sporting federations, which I can understand, I've done the wrong thing. But I've done my punishments, I've done my time and I've done what's asked of me. I want to get back to the thing that kept me out of trouble." ■

IMAGES COURTESY *The Cabin Chiang Mai*