

Jana Pittman, 35

Three-time Olympian, author, mother-to-three & InsideOut Institute Ambassador who lived with bulimia nervosa for 10 years, *SYDNEY*

Jana Pittman, 35, Sydney is best known for her illustrious 14-year-long track and field career specialising in the 400 metres and the 400 metre hurdles. The three-time Olympian who clinched gold at the World Championships and at the 2006 Commonwealth Games respectively, made history in 2014 when she competed in the nation's Winter Olympic women's bobsled team, and became the first Australian woman to have participated in both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games.



Today, the indefatigable single mother-to-three, who recently published a biography entitled *'Just Another Hurdle'*, is working hard to fulfil yet another childhood dream – to become a doctor.

Jana is also a newly appointed Ambassador to the InsideOut Institute – Australia's first institute for research and clinical excellence in eating disorders based at the Charles Perkins Centre at the University of Sydney. Having developed the potentially devastating eating disorder, bulimia nervosa in 2004, Jana spent the next decade battling a dysfunctional relationship with food while at the pinnacle of her sporting career. Following the breakdown of her marriage and a sporting injury, Jana eventually turned to therapy for help.

This is Jana's story.

For much of her life, Jana has been recognised for her dogged determination to succeed in her chosen sport. She has been extraordinarily successful, winning nine gold medals, including her first gold medal for Australia at the 1999 World Youth Championships. She competed the following year, at only 17 years of age, in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Next, she won gold at the 2003 and 2007 World Championships, and the 2002 and 2006 Commonwealth Games respectively.

For many years, the golden girl's life seemed perfect. Jana was a top-tier athlete who travelled the world, flanked by unwavering support from her loving family.

In January, 2008, however, Jana's life came crashing down, when her marriage began to falter as she struggled with an injury that would ultimately spell the end to her Olympic career.

"My marriage started to break down in January 2008 just when I was ramping up my Olympic campaign. But it wasn't to be, because I had a bad injury at the time that meant I was unable to compete in the Games.

"I subsequently became moody, started bingeing on food, and purging regularly. My life began spiralling out of control," said Jana.

From the age of 18, Jana had battled a dysfunctional relationship with food. The then professional athlete, who was acutely aware of the importance of diet and exercise as a driver for success, had nonetheless chosen to binge in secret – a behaviour that for some time, appeared not to compromise her professional performance.

"As an elite athlete, you have to watch what you eat. For someone like me who loves food, this was hard.

"One evening, in the early stages of my bulimia nervosa, I recall going out and eating what I wanted. It tasted so good. But when I returned home, I threw it all up," Jana said.

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“At the time, I was at the top of my game, competing globally and breaking world records. Now with the benefit of hindsight, I can see my eating disorder was wrapped up in the really positive experience of achieving my dreams, which probably escalated my problem.”

Between 18 to 26 years of age, Jana managed to hide her eating disorder from the world. However her calculated approach to eating and purging eventually began to spiral out of control.

“My bingeing started as something I was able to control. Athletes are constantly told what they can, and can’t do in most areas of their lives. Being fit and lean was something only I could control.

“Over time, I learned how to manipulate my body and to choose what I wanted to put into it. However, the disease eventually took hold, and I moved from being in control, to the disease controlling me,” said Jana.

“It took many years for me to recognise that I had a binge eating problem. It wasn’t until 2008, when the disorder began to affect my marriage, that I finally sought professional help.”

Fortunately Jana came into contact with a nutrition company at the time, with which she teamed to improve her eating habits.

“For the first time in my life, I learned how to eat a lot of nutritious and different types of foods, and to maintain a healthy weight. It was almost like a detox for me.

“Eating well improved my mood, and over time, I started to run well again, although I still occasionally binged,” Jana said.

Between 2009 and 2014 Jana worked with numerous people on her journey toward recovery.

“I’m no longer in therapy, but up until two years ago, I was seeing many fabulous people who helped me to recognise the cause of my disorder, and armed me with many techniques to help counter it.

“I began to embrace the various techniques I had learned, and was feeling the self-love required to continue my journey toward recovery,” said Jana.

“On occasion I have moments when I eat something and experience a pang of guilt. But these days, I chose to just get on with it, and to start afresh again the following day.”

Given her first-hand experience with bulimia nervosa, Jana nowadays offers substantial support to many young people, particularly athletes in similar pressure cooker situations.

“I love mentoring young girls and track and field athletes, and I work hard to change their mindsets by promoting the benefits of having a positive body image,” Jana said.

Jana hopes to utilise her new appointment as an Ambassador to the InsideOut Institute, to both encourage and inspire other Australians, particularly the young living with eating disorders, to reach out for help, and not feel embarrassed or ashamed by doing so.

“By speaking out, I hope to encourage more conversation about eating disorders, and reassure those affected that it’s okay to ask for support.

“The InsideOut Institute’s work will help ensure everyone living with an eating disorder feels supported in their recovery, and make significant headway in how eating disorders are both viewed and treated in Australia,” said Jana.

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