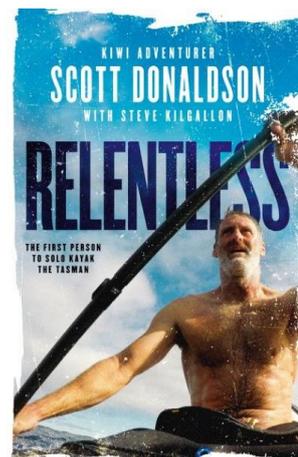


Extracted from *Relentless: The First Person to Solo Kayak the Tasman* by Scott Donaldson with Steve Kilgallon. Published by HarperCollins NZ. Available now.

Scott Donaldson is a former triathlete, Coast-to-Coast competitor, Ironman coach, mentor and competitor in a myriad of sports. He began as a swimmer to strengthen his lungs, after having life-threatening asthma as a child. Scott's son also has asthma, and his father died aged 42 from a heart attack, and so Scott has made fitness a life priority. In 2018 Scott successfully became the first person to solo kayak the Tasman.



THREE HOURS AFTER I completed my piece of history, I was sitting in hospital with Zac. It quickly put my feet back on the ground.

Zac has what's called episodic asthma. That means generally it's no problem, but colds and changes in season can trigger an attack. We've tried various drug regimens to prevent them without any effect: he's either 100 per cent well, or he isn't.

When he was seven, he got that sort of flu that stays with people for weeks. For him, that means asthma comes too. Within two weeks, he required prednisone, a strong steroid drug delivered over a three- to five-day course. Then it was a second course, then antibiotics and a hospital visit. For most asthmatics, it's usually a one- to three-day admission when they go to hospital.

After several hospital visits and a best-guess cocktail of strong antibiotics and prednisone, the specialists were no closer to finding a solution to Zac's illness. We did all the usual tricks – managing his energy, vacuuming incessantly, wiping every surface in the house (including the walls) every few days, constantly measuring his peak flow (his maximum lung output), eating well, including lots of anti-inflammatory foods and supplements such as turmeric, vitamins, garlic and honey-lemon drinks. It was important to us that he shared in the process – he was only seven – because we felt that if he understood what was happening, he could come through the tough times stronger and with the skills to manage his own asthma as he gets older.

The prednisone saw him gain four kilograms in two weeks. It gave him stiff joints, cramps, moon face, increased appetite, night terrors, decreased sleep and fatigue. Worst of all, it took the edge off his normally sparkly eyes. It sucked. There are parents

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out there who face a lot worse every day, but feeding your kid a drug with such visible consequences isn't pleasant.

We finally managed to wean him off prednisone after three months. Once he returned to school, we started him swimming: at first, just 10 minutes every second morning to stretch the lungs.

Swimming was by far the most measurably effective thing we did for his asthma, including any of the drug regimens.

Swimming helped us get him off the prednisone and reset his body to normal, even though he still couldn't run himself into the ground playing like a normal seven-year-old might – and he still had to take preventative drugs.

I tell this story as an example, to give an insight into living with asthma, not to seek your sympathy or make comparisons to anyone else's lives. We all know someone with asthma. In New Zealand, one in seven children and one in nine adults have asthma, on a scale from manageable to lethal – in 2015, there were 421 deaths in Australia attributable to asthma.

I don't want to adopt a victim attitude: Zac and I don't suffer from asthma. The word 'suffer' would imply that it controls or even defines us. We own it, it doesn't own us.

It's part of me, and I recognise its consequences and I don't try to ignore it, but I don't allow it to control me.

It clearly doesn't stop people from performing at elite levels – it just means sometimes they have to work harder.

If you have – not suffer from – an illness or injury, you have to focus only on what you can do to cope or improve. That's vital for turning a victim into a survivor, or an illness or injury into a lifestyle adaptation. We all have to do it anyway as we age – and we all know people who do it well and those who don't. We can't change the fact that we will grow old, but our attitude is entirely at our disposal.

Breathing is something we all take for granted. Many associate asthma with sickness. I think it's more about living, and the better you are at it, the better the life you can experience.

Look at sport and the amazing feats of human performance that can be achieved by breathing well: the free divers who get to experience such a different world for minutes

at a time, or the many forms of meditation that use breathing to take us to a higher plane.

You can be very poor at breathing, or very good, or anywhere in between. It's one of the two pieces of physiology that has an effect on everything we do right now – the other, to point out the obvious, is the brain. Breathing for me is definitely a mind–body connection and a physiological skill for performance and asthma mitigation.

More importantly, it's a tool that can enable my son to feel better. The hardest part of being the parent of an asthmatic is that when they are small, there's really not much influence you can have and you must accept the barrage of drugs. But as they grow, you can influence their physiology and try to make drugs dispensable. Feeding Zac prednisone was one of the worst experiences of my life.

I learned from my mum to always be relaxed. Asthma is a little like drowning – you can be as good a swimmer as you like, but if you panic, you're done. During an asthma attack, it's vital that the parent and child remain calm and relaxed. It can prevent things from getting worse and even ease the symptoms. Of course, when you see your kid unable to breathe, it's hard not to panic. But Sarah picked up this skill early and she realised you can't just act calm – your kids can see through that. You actually have to be calm so that they follow suit.

Zac has become a model patient: he takes his preventative medication without complaint, and he stays composed under respiratory stress.

The swimming lessons have helped improve his breathing skills. He swims well, but we haven't encouraged racing as he sees swimming as a health choice, rather than as a sport.

If he decides he wants to be a competitive swimmer, then he can choose to do so when he gets older, but in any case he will still swim a couple of times a week as long as the asthma is present. (A note for those vicariously over-competitive parents out there – studies show that fewer than 15 per cent of elite under-10 performers go on to perform at senior level.)

My trans-Tasman paddle was a way to contribute to the work of Asthma New Zealand by raising awareness and funds and it was a logical fit with the journey. I am continuing to work with Asthma New Zealand to make a difference wherever possible.