

TO TOUCH THE SKY

At 13 years of age, **Bobby Bajram** was the youngest Australian ever to be diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. For most kids, that would be a devastating blow, but Bobby took it in his stride and today, at 47, the once-multi millionaire is a ball of positive energy who dedicates his life to bringing recognition to people with all disabilities.



KIDS CAN CRUMBLE in the face of adversity, or they can stand tall. When you have everything in front of you, including a promising sports career, life's hard knocks can come down harder than an ACME cannonball. Bobby Bajram at times could be forgiven for thinking that he is the coyote on the wrong end of a dangerous explosive. But that isn't Bobby's style. It never has been.

In spite of his affliction, Bobby's zest for living is infectious and since first being diagnosed with MS, he has done all he can to prove that anyone with disability can do whatever they put their mind to.

"I was a super sportsman, athlete, footballer and all I wanted to do was play footy for South Melbourne," Bobby recalls.

"I was a super sportsman, all I wanted to do was play footy."

"I had just turned 13 and was excited to play under 14s, but I walked into a supermarket with my mum one day and BANG... my legs were gone. My sight was gone. I woke up in St. Vincent's Hospital."

Back in the late 1970s, technology was thin. There was no MRI in Australia, so Bobby underwent a series of lumbar punctures. Fluid was injected into his spine and CT scans lit up his brain. The diagnosis was for demyelination. News Medical describes a demyelinating disease as any disease of the nervous system in which the myelin sheath of neurons is damaged. This impairs the conduction of signals in the affected nerves, causing impairment in sensation, movement, cognition, or other functions depending on which nerves are involved.

Put simply, Bobby had MS. He was confined to a wheelchair for 14 years and was legally blind for the first five of those years.

"I said to the doctors, 'What's demyelination? Am I going to die?'"

"And they said, 'No, you've got Multiple Sclerosis' – which is the less technical term.

"So there I was, a 13 year old kid with no idea what to think, say, or do and the first thing that I said, and this is the truth, was 'Okay, I have no sight and no legs but one day I'm going to walk to the top of the world and I'm going to see the blue sky. I don't know when but I'm going to do it.'"

That positivity is one of Bobby's most endearing traits. He says he was born that way.

"I didn't get depressed, I was

frustrated because I couldn't play footy anymore and I wanted to join the army or be a chef. That's what the disease took away from me. But it never took away my dream to walk to the top of the world."

Mt Everest is one of the most revered mountains in the world. It has an elevation of 8,848 metres. It is the world's highest mountain from sea level. For Bobby, it is the top of the world. That place where he can touch the blue sky. He is currently in training to reach its peak.

There are two reasons he is going to the Himalayas. The first is to make good on the promise he made to himself as a 13-year-old. The second is to bring awareness to disabled people and what they are capable of. His goal is to set up a \$100 million trust fund for people with disabilities and their support groups to draw on when necessary.

This is no easy feat. He has been warned against making the climb. Certain doctors believe that this trip will be the death of him. Determination, however, is a not only a driver of success, but of human condition.

Bobby knows the risks and he has experienced the highs and lows of a climb during training.

"I train hard but I get sick. My legs go. My eyes go. After I climbed Mount Feathertop, I was in hospital for about four weeks."

Mount Feathertop is the second highest mountain in Australia. It rises 1,922 metres or 6,306 feet. When Bobby was descending he had an MS attack and half his body went limp.

"I was walking and then my legs started dragging and then my arm was dragging," Bobby says.

"I couldn't lift it and was walking with poles and used half my body to drag myself four kilometres – two to a water fountain because we'd run out of water and two kilometres back to camp.

Bobby believes that to go that extra one percent separates the good from the great, or the fantastic from

the excellent.

"It's just that one percent. Like Rafael Nadal versus the number four ranked player. He's number one because he gives that little bit extra. When I had my attack at Mount Feathertop, my expedition leaders said, 'Bobby, you've got two choices. You can come with us, or we can leave you and try to get help but it's likely you'll die.' I said, 'No, I'm coming for a walk' and I walked for another four kilometers. It took about five hours to go that distance and we made it back at 10pm. I was knackered, but I was cracking jokes and they said, 'Mate you're unbelievable, no one would do this in your condition.'"

Bobby's attitude is that he will be in a box for a long time, so now is the time to make his life exciting and impact other people by creating a positive outlook. He started by losing 40kg, so he could complete the mountain climbing feat. He then made approaches to a group of sponsors who he felt could get him up the mountain and facilitate his training. The first sponsor to come on board was Fitness First. Ian Dowson, Fitness First's Victorian manager, has been highly supportive and if Bobby lapses, it's the first place he heads to when he is

"To go that extra one percent separates the good from the great, or the fantastic from the excellent."

released from hospital.

"I made about a thousand phone calls and Fitness First opened up their doors for me. I'm now an ambassador for Fitness First Australia. They really help me get a positive message out to people with disabilities with regard to their health and training."

Once Fitness First was on board, finding sponsors became easier. Jayco joined up and allowed Bobby to use their climatisation room. It's the same room the Australian Tour de France team uses for their conditioning. Bobby trains at Fitness First during the day and then uses Jayco's facility to simulate mountain conditions. Falls Creek and Australian Adventure Guides also play a major role in his conditioning, particularly when it comes to trekking. Another major sponsor is Kathmandu, who supplies Bobby's clothes. Then there are the other sponsors like the Babo Group, Limerick Castle Hotel Group and Combat Mixed Martial Arts and Fitness, Mubble Ice Cream, First Bite Dental Surgery and Wynn's Personal Training.

Though some of these sponsors are small, Bobby can't praise them enough. They can't give him much, but his attitude is that every little bit counts. Even a free ice cream or ▶





dental check up makes a difference, because the less money Bobby has to spend, the more money goes into the trust to get him to Everest.

“The Limerick Castle guys said to me, ‘We love what you’re doing and we’d love to help you out.’ Every month they put money into a trust. It’s just awesome the amount of people that are supporting me who don’t want anything from me, but just want to support the cause.”

Bobby feels the support has come because everybody has some connection to a person with a disability and/or a carer.

“The carers do a great job but everyone forgets about them. So I want to raise \$100 million, which I don’t think will be a problem because this will be a worldwide movement. There are six billion people in the world and there are nearly a billion people in the world with a disability; if everyone puts in \$1 that is a billion dollars or if they put in 10 cents that is \$100 million.”

The charity account has been set up free of charge with the Commonwealth Bank. Donations go directly into The Bobby Bajram Mount Everest Disability Charity Climb. The first \$225,000 will be used to pay for Bobby’s Everest climb. It costs \$80,000 just for a license. Add



“I’m not kidding myself. I just hope that the world – and I know it will – support the cause.”

the cost of the team, the training mountains and Sherpas (four just for him) and the costs add up. As Bobby makes the climb there will be a website for people to donate whatever denomination they like. This money will go into Trust for people with disability and their carers. Alliances are being forged with the Melbourne City Council, The Fred Hollows Foundation and Epilepsy Action Australia. There’s about 150 million people in the world with epilepsy and everyone with MS and cerebral palsy have some form of epilepsy.

Bobby has been in hospital 132 times in his life, but he takes it in his

stride. What he wants is people with disabilities and their carers to be acknowledged and understood. He understands there are sceptics.

He knows that people have their doubts about whether he will even make it to Everest and if he does, whether he will make it back alive. Even his doctor doesn’t think he will survive. However, there is great support. Disabilities Minister Mitch Fifield, powerbroker Michael Kroger and Prime Minister Tony Abbott are right behind Bobby. By the time you read this story, Bobby will be in the Himalayas scaling Island Peak, the first of four mountains designated for the year. These four mountains will prepare him for a March 2015 Everest climb.

“This is the best way that I can contribute to society,” Bobby says.

“Disability at the moment is a buzzword, but there are little pockets of people doing things. I’m the only one out there uniting the cause.”

He has done this previously through documentaries. He has featured on community television with the show Let’s Make a Difference: Disability Matters. He followed that up with Behind Closed Doors, a hard-hitting show exposing the myths of disability and sex which was sold to the BBC and aired to approximately 200 million people after being shown nine times. But he’s done nothing to the scale of Everest.

“I’m not kidding myself. I just hope that the world – and I know it will – support the cause.”

Bobby is putting his life at risk, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. He is determined to walk back down the mountain because in this case the cause is bigger than the individual. **WGB ▶**

NB: To follow Bobby’s journey go to his Facebook page: [bobbybajrammounteverest2013](https://www.facebook.com/bobbybajrammounteverest2013). Or if you would like to support Bobby or donate to help get to Everest contact him on 0433933355.