



## HATS OFF

As a kid, **Phil Lewis** just wanted to be normal. But as **Kate Johnson** discovered, this determined lung transplant survivor and Around-the-Bay rider is anything but

**I**t was *The Biggest Loser* that started Phil riding. “I got hooked on the first series,” he says. “My wife Amy and I decided to get on the exercise bike for the half hour of the show. That turned into an hour and we just kept going. After a few months, we thought we should probably get real bikes.”

Phil was diagnosed at birth with cystic fibrosis, a genetic disorder in which the build-up of mucus in the lungs creates constant infection, making it extremely

three strokes at a time. Finally, I made it to the top, where they were all assembled in a crowd. There was a big cheer. I’d love to do that ride again to see how I’d go now.”

Bike riding has improved Phil’s general health and that can only be good, says Senior Physiotherapist at the Alfred Hospital, Dr Brenda Button. “It’s very important to keep moving post-transplant,” she says. “We do recommend, however, that people only exercise when rested and well-nourished, and if undertaking a larger challenge, perhaps consider taking their physician with them.”

“There are many benefits to a regular exercise routine,” says Dr Button. “They include the increase and maintenance of muscle mass and joint mobility, which may have deteriorated over time due to lack of movement. Post-transplant, a person has a new set of lungs but they still have cystic fibrosis and need to replace electrolytes, salt and fluid, as they sweat excessively. Hats off to Phil – his ride is a major achievement. But heavy exercise does need to be carefully monitored – and training and preparation are vital.”



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difficult to breathe. He never thought of himself as a bike rider. In fact, his memory of a school trip reveals why the 210km ride around Port Phillip Bay meant so much.

“In year 12, we did a 40-kilometre ride around Eildon,” he says. “Part of it was a five-kilometre climb

Phil did build up to the big day, training over months and completing a couple of 100-kilometre rides before tackling the real endurance test. But the longer ride wasn’t all smooth sailing. “At one point I noticed I was getting a lot of crackling when I breathed out,” says Phil. “Fluid was leaking into my lungs, filling them up. By the time I got to Werribee, I was in agony. I lay on the ground at the rest point, thinking, ‘There’s 40 kilometres to go – I’m *not* stopping here!’ After I finished the ride, I felt bewildered more than anything. It’s hard to fathom.”

After years of regular hospitalisations, antibiotics, physiotherapy and feeling physically incapable and ‘different’, Phil has now found a renewed sense of possibility through riding his bike. It has given him the gift of physical expression, a sense of achievement and a passion he can share with others. Ultimately, however, riding is a reflection of Phil’s courage in the face of the unknown, which, whether he likes it or not, is anything but ‘normal’. ☺

to the top of this hill. Of course, everyone else got there long before me. I’d pedal three strokes and have to get off, gasping for air. Every now and again, the teacher following behind me in the bus would get off, walk up to me and say ‘Phil, get on the bus’. But I’d say, ‘No. Go away’. I kept cycling up this hill,

Determination and a great smile: there’s no stopping Phil Lewis

Photo: Amy Lewis Design