

At 5.30am on a cold Brisbane winter's morning, the woman wearing black tights, a pink jumper and white cap looks like most of the other 150-odd lining up for one of Pat Carroll's running sessions. Tucked in with her group of friends she affectionately calls the back-of-the-pack 'labradors' and doing her best to keep warm before setting off on a 3km warm-up, just like anyone else there.

Except for the discreet security staff who have also come for the jog.

Written by **MICHAEL WHITING**



■ Before her 12-hour workdays, Anna can be seen on early morning runs along the Brisbane River. IMAGE COURTESY OF PAT CARROLL

■ Anna at the 2008 GC Marathon press conference. IMAGE COURTESY OF QUEENSLAND EVENTS GOLD COAST



Anna Bligh

Just Like Everyone Else

QUEENSLAND'S PREMIER SINCE SEPTEMBER 13, 2007. Anna Bligh works a minimum six-day week, for a minimum 12 hours a day, and is always "on call".

Yet she makes running a priority. As loyal as one of those Labradors she likes to refer to herself as, Bligh always fronts up. Whether it's to a session with the Pat Carroll Running Group (PCRG) on Tuesdays and Thursdays or a long run with her friends on the weekend, she'll be there.

"I find it highly motivating being in a group. It's much more likely that I'll get out regularly and stick to it," she said.

"It keeps me out on the track regularly. I really notice it in winter. It

would be very easy without the group to pull the doona over my head and think 'oh, I'll go next week' and suddenly you find you haven't been out for three weeks.

"But that doesn't happen now with Pat's group because I know I have to get up and I've got friends in the group who if I don't turn up we text each other, 'you're soft'.

"We have a little motto that 'our job is to think of each other' and that means we text each other the night before to see if we're going to the group and if you don't show you get a very nasty message.

"It's really improved my running. It's only natural that when you're in a group you push yourself a bit harder.

I look at people and think 'they're my age or older and they can go that fast, I should push myself harder'.

"The monthly 3k time trial, I hate it. I would never put myself through the really hard hill sessions or speed sessions that Pat doesif I was out running by myself I just wouldn't be able to push myself as hard as a group pushes me, so that's a good thing."

About 10 of us head off to start the warm up a bit in front of the quick guys to make sure we get back to the Botanical Gardens for the session start at the same time as everyone else.

On a pitch black, perfectly still morning, the first thing the Premier says as we head out over the Goodwill Bridge from South Bank is "isn't the

city beautiful in the morning?"

As we make our way around the gardens and into the city. Bligh is noticeably relaxed for someone that is in the spotlight on a daily basis.

Just hours from now she'll be on the witness stand in court, but it seems the furthest thing from her mind. Either that or she's one of the great actresses, because she seems a lot chattier than most stern-faced politicians you see on the television.

A few construction workers recognise the Premier and say hello as we come back on to Eagle St. She gives that warm smile and responds in kind.

It's about at this stage I start wondering how annoying it must be to have people recognise you from before

"For me, getting up and being out when the sun is coming up and the city is looking beautiful and you're running around the river, everything else seems ok. No matter how big the decisions are, no matter how ugly the day is going to be, how hard some of the things I have to confront are, it's a good reminder that the world is beautiful."

READER PROFILE

six in the morning until who knows what hour at night.

All 155 runners (a PCRG record for one session) assemble at the Gardens for one of their last sessions before the Gold Coast Marathon weekend – it will be Anna's fifth successive dip at the half marathon.

It's a long way from her early running days in the 1980s, running on New Zealand's South Island in the freezing cold.

"When I left school I didn't do anything and I found myself in my early 20s and suddenly my jeans didn't fit me any more. So I took up fun running," she said.

"I literally started jogging around the block and went in a couple of fun runs and found I loved it.

"Then I came back to Australia and had my first son. I ran on and off as I had my children but I found it harder to be disciplined when you have nights with children who are sick or keeping you up late but I've always kept it up."

Some of Bligh's earliest running memories came when she met her husband Greg in Sydney and they pounded the pavement together in training for the City2Surf.

She tells with great pride the second time they ran it together, just prior to the 2000 Olympics, was a whopping 10 minutes quicker than their debut attempt in 1986!

"I've got much more serious about it in the last decade and applied myself more. I joined Pat's group four years ago and never looked back. Pat's taken 13 minutes off my half marathon time.

"I'd seen Pat's group but didn't know anything about them. I plucked up the courage and came along and never looked back. It's a very familiar story. There aren't many people who come for a first one and don't come back.

"Everybody can find their place in the group. There's people who are very serious, and then there's people like myself, we call ourselves the Labradors at the back of the pack, and everybody in between. There's all shapes and sizes, all ages, all levels of ability, and you can go along and work your hardest and do your best and still enjoy being in the group."

Pat launches into some inspirational stuff about how lucky the runners are to be healthy and competing on the weekend and how thinking every race was his last chance drove him on during his own glittering career.

He has the group hanging on every word.

He's probably given the same speech a thousand times, but PC still has a way of keeping it fresh and his passion can only inspire you.

Then comes the news about the session – 2 x 2mins, 2 x 1min and 2 x 30 seconds with a 30 second stand around recovery, followed by some up-and-back hills. It's a taper session

so nothing too strenuous.

We start doing a few strides and one of Pat's trusty photographers that takes shots at every session, grabs a shot of Anna and yells a cheeky 'lift your knees', which draws a laugh and smile from the lady it was directed at.

She's also reflecting on last year's Gold Coast half and hoping there's no repeat episode this time around.

Between five or six strides of around 80m, Bligh recounts how she donned a pair of sponsor's shoes for the first time in the race and was almost in tears at the 8km mark.

At 17km the shoes just had to come off.

"As soon as I did, I just felt 1000 percent better and thought 'I'm going to finish this race, I can't stop this close'. So running the last 3.5k in socks on bitumen was quite an effort. It was my slowest half marathon ever but for me it was a real sense of achievement. That was a big mental victory for me to say to myself 'you are going to finish this', and I got over the line - three toenails less.

"For me that's one of the great things about running ... when you push yourself harder than you thought possible you find what you're capable



■ Anna is a regular with the Pat Carroll Running Group on Brisbane's Southbank. IMAGE COURTESY OF PAT CARROLL



■ Anna with Pat Carroll and the famous Pink Flamingo. IMAGE COURTESY OF PAT CARROLL

"I find if I do let my running slip, that's when I'll find the job getting on top of me."

of and when you know what you're capable of you can do anything."

She's never done a full marathon, time simply doesn't allow for the training, but Bligh has not ruled it out in the future.

The first whistle blows to start the session and it really is a case of every man and woman for themselves. Anna jumps out pretty quickly and I'm thinking her half marathon PB of 2.06 is a bit understated if she can maintain

this pace.

We go whizzing past a few people on the first two minute rep, then settle in for the remainder of the session with a familiar group of runners puffing and working hard around us.

Pat's blaring music, including plenty of Bon Jovi – Livin' on a Prayer, Blaze of Glory - probably isn't the usual fare for the peaceful surroundings, but it seems to hit a cord with its audience at this hour.

The Premier gets through the session well and says she's feeling good for the weekend's race. There's a whole crowd of runners at the top of the final hill rep cheering each other on to finish.

It's just one big team at PCRG. It's a team she says she could not do her job without.

Sitting down and having a coffee (or tea in her case) with the Premier, you can see and hear the excitement

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in her voice when we're talking about running.

For 95 percent of her waking hours, she's consumed by running Queensland and everything that comes with it.

"I get picked up from my house every morning at 7.30 at the latest. If I'm travelling it can be quarter to six. I'm at my desk at 7.45 but I'm often working before that, doing radio interviews.

"Staff will be calling me about whatever's in the paper, so I sort of start working as soon as I'm awake. Most days I usually watch the 7 o'clock news at work.

"I work a minimum of six days a week. I try for my family, for my mental health and my sanity, to have one day off a weekend where I don't have official duties. But generally I'm doing 12 hour days, 6 days a week minimum, but this is a 24-7 job.

"One of those jobs you think you know what you're doing and then suddenly someone rings and says 'we've got a cyclone coming in', so I'm down at the emergency centre and we're on. If you do have something like a flood or a cyclone, you're getting hourly updates at 3 in the morning.

"So it can go from a run like this in the morning through to a cabinet meeting, press conferences and then a ball, where I have to get frocked up, where I have to get out of my business suit and put on the tiara. So we go from the running shoes and the sweaty red face to getting frocked up for the ball."

With such a hectic and unpredictable working life, Bligh admits it would be very easy to sacrifice other areas.

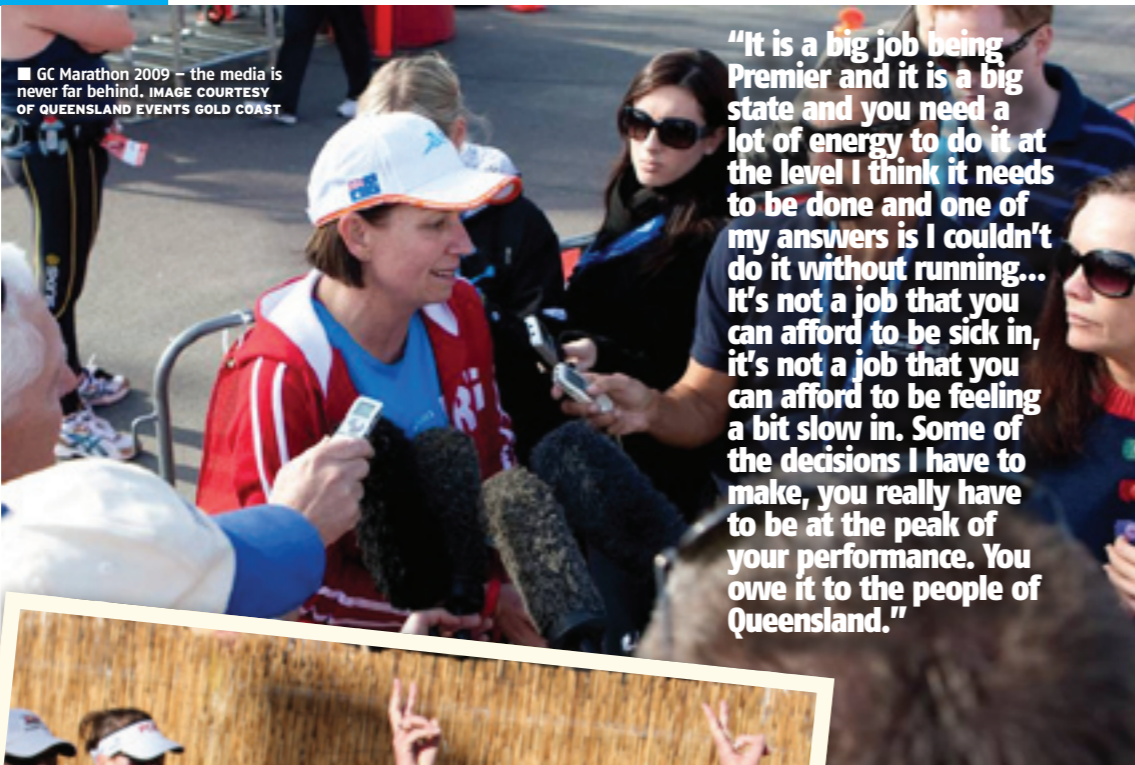
Outside of running she's a wife to Greg and mother to Oliver and Joe. She said her and Greg always try to get a long bike ride in together on the weekend, while the Golden Retriever Zeddy is in constant demand of attention.

"It is a big job being Premier and it is a big state and you need a lot of energy to do it at the level I think it needs to be done and one of my answers is I couldn't do it without running.

"It keeps me fit. It's not a job that you can afford to be sick in, it's not a job that you can afford to be feeling a bit slow in. Some of the decision I have to make, you really have to be at the peak of your performance. You owe it to the people of Queensland.

"I find if I do let my running slip, that's when I'll find the job getting on top of me."

With the small warm down back to South Bank's Ship Inn negotiated, the masses are gathering around PC's



GC Marathon 2009 - the media is never far behind. IMAGE COURTESY OF QUEENSLAND EVENTS GOLD COAST

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Qld Premier, Anna Bligh celebrates finishing the 2009 Gold Coast Half Marathon. WWW.MARATHON-PHOTOS.COM

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"No matter how big the decisions are, no matter how ugly the day is going to be, how hard some of the things I have to confront are, it's a good reminder that the world is beautiful.

"The other thing I love about running is it's a great cross section of people, some have an interest in politics, most don't, they don't talk about politics in running groups, you go along and people are more interested in the time they did in their last race and it's a good leveller.

"Just reminding yourself of this is as important as it is to know what's on the front page of the paper or worry about what's in the polls or be nervous about the next big decision, there's a lot of other things in people's lives.

"A lot of the conversation we have when we're running around the riverside is that people are worried about what their children are doing, mums and dads are nervous about Schoolies coming up, or one of the elderly parents has to be put in a nursing home. It's a group full of ordinary people with ordinary lives and it's a very good reminder in politics to touch base with that regularly.

"The other thing I love about being in this group is I'm not the Premier, I'm just a slow Labrador at the back of the group."

A slow Labrador with her tights, jumper and cap, like everyone else. 🐕

spread of fruit, juice and everything else.

The Premier is just an ordinary runner, mixing with the group like anyone else.

I haven't heard every word spoken to her in the 70 minutes or so since we've met, but there hasn't been one mention of politics yet.

PC has everyone's race numbers

sorted for Gold Coast and there's a bit of a scramble for collection and once Anna has hers we're off down the road with her little team for a coffee and more formal interview.

"I think any form of regular exercise is a very good stress release," she said.

"For me, getting up and being out

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