



**HAMISH McLACHLAN**  
one on one with  
**MATT THIELE**

MATT Thiele, 22, was just three when he was trapped in a burning car as his horrified mother, Lisa, watched on. He was flown to the Royal Children's Hospital with burns to 30 per cent of his body and was immediately placed on life support. Doctors suggested to Matt's parents that they turn off his life support. They didn't. Matt fought on, but spent his early childhood years hidden behind his mother, trying to avoid the stares and attention of strangers. Years on, Matt has found his confidence and self-esteem. I had a cup of tea with him and his mum at their home this week, and left thinking he might be the happiest and most welcoming young man I've met.

**HM: Matt, where have you just landed from?**

**MT:** We just landed from Phuket. Ten days away with the family. It was terrific.

**HM: I hear you might have enjoyed a few White Russians?**

**MT:** Yeah, maybe for a couple of nights! Kahlua, vodka and milk ... the milk is good for you, I hope!

**HM: I'm sure it is. You and I are doing a lunch together in a few weeks for the KIDS Foundation. How long have you known about the KIDS Foundation?**

**MT:** About 12 years. I've been going to their burn survivor camps, and it's been a real eye-opener for me. I'm now a youth ambassador for them, as well as a mentor to young burn survivors. It's going really well and I really like helping people find their confidence again, like I found mine there.

**HM: It sounds like a very important place for a lot of people. How and when did you suffer your burns?**

**MT:** I was three when I was in a car that caught on fire. I suffered 30 per cent full-thickness burns mainly to my hands, arms, chest and face. I was flown to the Royal Children's Hospital where I spent 33 days in intensive care. I had a machine that was breathing for me, and a bunch of life support systems.

**HM: Were you alone in the car?**

**MT:** I was. Mum had just driven to pick up my older sister and brother from school. She came into the driveway and walked in to the house. For some reason I decided to lock all the car doors. While I was in there, the car caught on fire. By the time Mum got the keys from the house, I was pretty badly burnt.

**HM: How did the car catch on fire?**

**MT:** No one could work it out — it was inconclusive. Mum wasn't a smoker,

the car wasn't running because the keys were out because Mum had opened the door. It's still a mystery — we still don't know. Pretty unlucky, though!

**HM: And you couldn't open the doors when the fire started?**

**MT:** No — I was trapped in.

**HM: Who got you out?**

**MT:** My mum rushed into the house to get her keys and unlocked the car. We had a gardener at the time who helped her to get me out of the car.

**HM: If your mum wasn't as inquisitive as she is, you may not be here — the doctors recommended to her that they turn your life support off?**

**MT:** Yeah, so after monitoring me for quite some time the doctors eventually told my parents that they didn't think I'd have a very good quality of life if I survived. In their minds, that was a very big "if", too — they didn't think I would make it. They put the question to my mum and dad, and told them that they suggested they turn the life support off. They didn't, obviously, because I'm here, and from there on the doctors were very shocked at my recovery.

**HM: Did your parents at any stage contemplate turning the machines off?**

**MT:** I don't really know that answer — did you, Mum?

**Lisa:** After you had had two major cardiac arrests they realised there was brain damage. They said, "We don't think his quality of life is going to be very good," because everything shuts down — all your organs, everything. Then they asked me, "What do you think about it?" and I said that I didn't think I could do it. My husband was working at the time.

**HM: And your husband?**

**LT:** He wasn't actually with me when they spoke to me, which was very disappointing. He was working really late that night, and they said, "Well, we can't wait for him, you need to tell us."

**HM: That's too big a decision for one parent to make.**

**LT:** It was horrific. I said I couldn't make that decision and that I wanted to speak to all the specialists and get their input. I wanted everyone to tell me what they actually thought, not just one doctor. After that, I could give them a decision. The weekend went by, and by Monday they asked if I'd made my decision. I told them that I didn't want to turn it off, and they said, "Well, to be honest, he's come off three of the medications that were keeping him alive and has turned the corner!"

**HM: You're a tough little bugger — and well done, Mum!**

**MT:** Yep. Still alive today — how good's that!

**HM: Do you remember anything of the ordeal as a three-year-old?**

**MT:** No, it's completely blanked out. A very traumatic

# SCARRRED BUT NO LONGER SCARRRED

Matt Thiele is giving back to the foundation that helped him find his confidence again



Matt Thiele this week (right); before his accident (left); and (bottom left) with fellow burns survivors Turia Pitt and Brock Howes. Main picture: JAKE NOWAKOWSKI



experience like that often results in everything being blanked from your mind. I have no recollection of being in hospital, or having surgeries — and you probably wouldn't as a three-year-old anyway. My first memories are the visits to hospital.

**HM: How many surgeries have you had?**

**MT:** North of 100. It's been a long journey.

**HM: What part of your body was most affected in the fire?**

**MT:** My fingers were so badly burnt that they actually had to chop them off at certain points. I've lost all my knuckles along my fingers. My thumbs are OK, though.

**HM: Your arms look unscathed.**

**MT:** My chest was a little bit burnt, but below that I'm sort of fine. The issue is, what skin was fine they have to use to patch me up. They take the good skin and graft it to the actual burnt area.

**HM: When was the last time the grafting process was done?**

**MT:** I had an operation last year in December. I had a graft on my shoulder, eyes and face.

**HM: Will you continue to have grafts done because your body grows when your skin doesn't?**

**MT:** That's exactly right. As my bones grow, the burnt skin doesn't. It gets very tight and it actually constricts movement if it's left too long. That's where the skin grafts come in handy. When I got the one on my shoulder it provided a lot of movement in my left arm. It's like wearing a really tight bandage, or strapping. It's often described as wearing a very tight wetsuit. Essentially, with the skin graft you've got to sort of cut it, and then regraft it somehow.

**HM: When you stop growing, does that mean you'll stop having grafts?**

**MT:** Yeah, it can mean that, unless I find something that I want done.

**HM: What would something like that be?**

**MT:** It just depends what you're looking at. I actually had more padding put on the knuckles of my left hand. We haven't done that on the

right hand, but we may want to do that eventually.

**HM: For comfort, aesthetics or practicality?**

**MT:** A bit of all. In one case the bone actually breached the skin, because it's gotten very thin around that knuckle area. It can be very easily knocked, which makes it bleed.

**HM: So if you graze that burnt skin, is it much more fragile than unburnt skin?**

**MT:** Yep. I'm not sure how to explain it, it's just a lot thinner. Sometimes I'll knock my hand and there'll be blood everywhere. I'll just think to myself, where does this come from?

**HM: Is there a brotherhood among burn victims? You've met a lot through the KIDS Foundation.**

**MT:** Yep. When I first went to the camps, you get a very big sense of belonging.

**HM: And you hadn't felt that prior?**

**MT:** Not really. I got the boost that I needed for my confidence and self-esteem. Ever since then, I've basically become a part of their family,





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and them a part of mine. We're tightly bound, we're all friends and we all know each other. We all stay connected, whether that's through Facebook, email or whatever. Then we all get to catch up on the camps, and just have a good time and do whatever we like. **LT:** It's interesting from a mother's perspective. Matt had got to a point where we'd walk through a shopping centre and he'd hide behind me, because there were so many people that would just crowd around and stare. His self-esteem was down to nothing. **MT:** I couldn't cope with it, but I went to the KIDS Foundation and saw all these other burns survivors — it was a revelation. I realised that I wasn't the only one. I saw all of these burns survivors going out and doing all these activities and just having a good time. I thought, well, what am I doing sitting around hiding behind Mum's back? That's when I began to live my life. Now I feel I can go out and be comfortable with being burnt. **LT:** Even now when the youngest burns survivors come in, you see them look up to Matt and think, wow, he can do that, why can't I! It's great to see that camaraderie with them all; it's awesome.

**The KIDS Foundation is hosting a fundraising lunch on June 26 at the RACV City Club. Matt will be a speaker. Details: [kidsfoundation.org.au](http://kidsfoundation.org.au). Tickets: 9944 8876 or email [memberevents@racv.com.au](mailto:memberevents@racv.com.au). All money raised from ticket sales and at the event will be donated to KIDS to help them educate and empower the little people in our lives so they are ready to take on and face the world. [kidsfoundation.org.au](http://kidsfoundation.org.au)**

**HM: How long did it take you to get more comfortable in public?**

**MT:** In the first two or three years of going to camp, you'd begin to come out of your shell a little bit. I do see it a lot with the younger burn survivors, because I'm older now, so I get to see younger burn survivors come to their first camp. They are pretty much exactly the same as I was: shy and closed off. By the next time you see them they're much happier, and comfortable being around people.

**HM: If you go to the movies now, you're at ease?**

**MT:** Yeah, I am now. If I'm at the movies with friends or family I don't really care as much now. Occasionally — and I think this will happen all my life — I get stares or even comments from kids and other people.

**HM: Like?**

**MT:** Most of the time you get kids doing that. I remember when I was a lot younger, people would make comments to Mum, or even to me, about wearing a mask, or something of that nature.

**HM: Were they hurtful to you, or just ignorant?**

**LT:** Ignorant. Most of the time they weren't trying to hurt us, and a couple of times they realised that he didn't actually have a mask on. Well, we actually had a lady when we were walking through a shopping centre say, "What happened to your face?" There's things like that where people just need to be sensitive and understand how to go about tough conversations.

**MT:** But on that point, sometimes I do get people who come up to me, and they're not sure how to ask. I think

that's why sometimes they say, "What happened to your face?", or something of that nature. They're not trying to be mean; they're just trying to understand.

**HM: What's the best way to approach it from your end?**

**MT:** If people say, "Oh, sorry to ask ..." I can tell that they are genuinely sorry to ask, but they want to know as well, or they will say, "Do you mind if I ask you what happened?" That brings it on to me, and from there I can say yes, and I'll tell them, but it also allows me, if I don't want to for whatever reason, to say no. Usually I'm happy to explain to anyone who asks me. From there, I'll tell them that I'm glad they asked me in that particular way, which makes them feel more comfortable, and we talk about it.

**HM: I heard you once say, "I'd rather people didn't assume", when you were talking about not being able to do things. Assume what?**

**MT:** That I can't do things.

**HM: What can't you do?**

**MT:** Nothing really, so include us, we'll be fine! We just have burnt skin, nothing else. People assume that I'm

unable to do certain things, and I don't like that. I'd rather them come and ask me, and if I'm able to do it, I'll do it.

**HM: You're mentoring burns victims now. Do you enjoy that?**

**MT:** Yeah, it's good. When I go on the camps, I'm usually buddied with a young survivor. When we buddy with someone, we're with them the whole time. On some camps the parents aren't there, so we're looking after them.

**HM: What's one of the most horrifying burns victim cases you've heard of?**

**MT:** We know of two great young boys who were deliberately burnt by their father.

**HM: How old were they?**

**MT:** They're older now — it was over five years ago — but I think when it happened they were about five and eight.

**HM: How are they coping?**

**MT:** They're OK — they're better now. They don't see their father anymore, he's in jail. But their stepfather's very good to them. Their mum has remarried and they have their own father figure now. I think that's really good for them.

**HM: How old were you when you started doing karate for rehab?**

**MT:** I got into karate because it passed as physiotherapy. It ended up really helping me. With an acquired brain injury, it does tend to repair itself a little bit more. I couldn't do a lot of stuff, so that's why I didn't get into a lot of sport. There's others that don't have the brain injury who can get straight into it. I think I was 11.

**HM: How many years before you got your black belt?**

**MT:** About six. It was a good achievement, I think!

**HM: You're quite entrepreneurial. You run your own vending machine business.**

**MT:** Yes, I have four vending machines! I've got my own little business going there. I sell snacks and drinks — chips, chocolate, cans, bottles.

**HM: How did you end up with your first?**

**MT:** It was mentioned to Dad, and then he mentioned it to me. We'd heard about it through a friend of ours that owned office buildings. Dad came to me and said, "This guy wants to know if we can get vending machines in these offices", so we looked into it a little bit. Initially I said no, but we did it, and one became two, two became three, three became four.

**HM: You'll have 500 soon.**

**MT:** Yeah, that would be cool!

**HM: You're 22 now. What would you like to be doing at 30?**

**MT:** Married, kids, house ...

**HM: And where would you go each morning to work?**

**MT:** Maybe a warehouse full of stock for my 500 vending machines!

**HM: Noosa Triathlon. When?**

**MT:** November 4. I'm doing the 10km run leg with another person from the KIDS team. The KIDS Foundation has a team of about 10 or 20 that do the triathlon to raise money and awareness.

**HM: Just ask you, you'll do it.**

**MT:** That's it!

**HM: You'll do it easily. For people that have suffered burns recently, what's your advice?**

**MT:** Go to the KIDS Foundation — look them up. Keep going and don't give up.

**HM: Perfect. Good luck in the tri, thanks for the tea and thanks for sharing your story.**

**MT:** Thanks for listening.