

‘David Sharpe was a great talent and is a genuine character. His fascinating memoir is honest about the roller-coaster of world-class athletics.’

*Colin Youngson,
distance-running historian*

‘A brutally honest exposé of David’s life on and off the track. I couldn’t put it down.’

*Greg Whitfield, 800m Running Page
Facebook group founder*

‘Wow! What a brilliant read. Insightful, searingly honest, very funny and so moving at times, I really felt that I was there with David.’

*Diane Hedley, daughter of the late
Jimmy Hedley OBE, David’s coach*



David Sharpe
and Brian Gardner

Foreword by
Steve Cram

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ENIGMA ON TRACK

Wild Child
to World Champion

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Chapter One

Wild Child

Jarrow, England, the 70s

I REMEMBER my first day at nursery like it was yesterday. My dad was getting me ready and saying, ‘Don’t worry, it’s only for a few hours, I’ll be back at two o’clock to pick ye up.’

And that set something off in my brain for me to go apeshit. My dad had to carry me there, which was only about 400 metres from where we lived, and I was wriggling and crying and screaming all the way. My temper was sometimes off the Richter scale. Going through the gates of the nursery, as soon as he put me down that was it, I was away like a shot. And if it hadn’t been for a woman who stopped me at the gate, I’d have been back home in no time. She picked me up, her hands underneath my arms, and passed me back to my dad.

WILD CHILD

Looking back now, I don't know how fast I ran but that was the beginning of me having this extra energy and burst of speed. I can't remember anything else about nursery. But that particular day sticks in my head.

I was a wild child from Jarrow. There were things I did as a kid that I don't think were normal. I used to always be reminded by my mam and nanna of something that I did when I was five or six, although I can't honestly remember doing it. They were trying to get me in from playing in the garden, to get ready for my bed, but I didn't want to. And I always had to get my own way, which was a nightmare for my mam and nanna. If my dad had been home, it wouldn't have been a problem. He was a sort of disciplinarian, and if I was clarting about in the back garden, up to no good, and he wanted me in, I'd come in. But he'd work backshifts and nightshifts, and on this occasion he wasn't home. So I was giving my mam and nanna a hard time.

Anyway, eventually they made me come in. And with my fierce temper, being exceptionally hyper and at times uncontrollable, I had to get back at them. What was the worst thing I could possibly do?

It was a Sunday, when my mam always washed our whites. So I went and found a lump of coal from the back garden, and because they'd made me come in early, it went in the washer. It's something I can't remember doing, but up until about 30 years later, I

was often reminded of it. The washer was supposed to wash your whites whiter than white, but not on that black Sunday. For me, it was payback.

I was always climbing everywhere. I had a problem sleeping (still do). When I was about eight years old, I'd go to bed and wait for my parents to go to theirs. Then I'd get up and climb down the banister to the bottom of the stairs. I'd have to touch the floor to go into the sitting room, but then I'd go round the sitting room from one chair to the three-piece to another chair, into the kitchen, over all the kitchen units, back the way I came, all without stepping on the floor, then I'd have to touch down just once again to get back up the stairs. It was a challenge, and I'd have done the whole thing off the floor if it hadn't been for that one step to get into the sitting room. Now, I don't know whether that's normal or not. I don't suppose it is.

If it wasn't climbing, it was jumping over things. Our garden wall was four or five feet away from the grass with a path in between. I'd try to jump from the grass and over the wall without touching the path. I managed to do it but I landed on my shin and took a chunk out of it. What happened next was one of my regular visits to A&E. I had to have eight stitches, and I've still got the scar.

I loved wildlife and still do. As a child, instead of just watching birds flying about, I'd take it upon myself

to try to catch them. I'd put a bit of bread in a bucket, and attach a bit of string going up from the garden to my bedroom window. I'd watch from the window, and as soon as a sparrow or a blackbird went into the bucket I'd pull on the string and trap it. Watching birds wasn't enough for me, I needed to get closer, one way or another. I wanted to handle them before I let them go.

We had a cabin in the back garden, and I noticed that the birds would feed from the top of it. So I climbed up on the cabin roof to try to catch them. I didn't know that Dad was watching me until I heard him shouting, 'What the bliddy hell d'ye think ye're doin?'

This gave me a shock and I jumped off, but didn't see the washing line, which tipped me upside down and flipped me on to my back and neck with a thud. I was so winded that I couldn't breathe and I'd ripped my hand open as well. So it was another trip to A&E, and seven stitches in my hand.

There's a photo of the family at the start of our holidays, me with 15 stitches: eight in my shin and seven in the hand. And we hadn't even reached Blackpool yet. I was accident-prone alright. But nothing would stop me messing about, running, jumping or climbing, even when the police came to our door after I was seen up on the school roof.

Dad used to work in a chemical factory in Jarrow. I'm sure he wasn't supposed to do this, but he brought

stuff home from work and kept an array of little bottles in his cabin. He'd tell me about the different chemicals. This one would go into lipsticks, that one into creams and another into hair dye.

As a kid I was always out where I shouldn't have been and coming home covered in oil or paint or muck. Dad would take me down to the cabin, open one of his bottles and use what was inside to wipe the muck off me. I was never sure what it was that he put on me.

Dad would shower as soon as he came in from work, and then he'd pay me 50 pence to comb his hair. That might sound weird, but no matter how much he showered, he could never get rid of this pungent smell coming off him and these tiny grains, like salt, stuck in his hair. Whatever they were (something to do with the chemicals), they gave off this smell.

One night my mam had a bad head, and Dad said he'd go to the cabin and sort it out. I had my pyjamas on and followed him, but he said, 'Get out the way, cos this is bliddy dangerous. It's for your ma's bad head.' I saw this little clear jar with a black top. Dad took the top off it and said, 'Right, Mary, I'm going to put this under your nose. Don't snort it up hard, just take a tiny, tiny sniff.'

But Mam took a big snort, and I was thinking, *We're gonna need an ambulance here.* When I smelled it, I don't know how to describe it, it was like the worst

thing you could ever smell. So, what it was like for Mam with it right up her nose, I can't imagine. She had tears coming down from her eyes, she was struggling to breathe, coughing and spluttering, and she started going haywire. After a couple of minutes of this she said, 'What have ye done to me?'

And Dad, laughing, said, 'Yer bad head's gone now, hasn't it? I told ye not to bliddy sniff it!' Mam recovered eventually, but she never let Dad forget it. I didn't find out until a long time afterwards that it was ammonia, although it might have been watered down.

Dad was generally a quiet person but he had a sneaky sense of humour, which he passed on to me. One of his workmates told me a story about when he hid inside a barrel in a dark corridor at work, ready to jump out and give his pals a fright. The only problem was, when he jumped out he banged his head on some metal piping and gave himself more than a fright. I'd always wondered how he got that bruise on his head.

Years later, a link between the chemicals at the factory and cancer was found. Dad had always said that working with benzene and formaldehyde was dangerous, that he'd be lucky to live another two or three years and he wouldn't live to 50, then 60, then 70. He said it right up until a couple of weeks before he went into hospital with a stomach tumour, which killed him at the age of 81. But he'd outlived a lot of

his friends who worked with him at that factory. They all died of cancer-related illnesses long before my dad. The factory's been closed for years. That kind of thing wouldn't be allowed nowadays.

Dad used to be a fast sprinter, and my brother Robert (Bob, although I always called him 'Our Lad'), who's four years older than me, was a good footballer. Lewis, Robert's son (my nephew), went on to be a soccer star for Georgia Gwinnett Grizzlies. So there must be something in the genes as well as all those chemicals.

Everywhere I went, I ran. Our Lad and I would run up to the nearest field to our house and spend hours playing football one-on-one. Jumpers for goalposts, of course. Our Lad was mad about football and better than me, so it was always me who had to go in goal first. On a weeknight we'd be there for a couple of hours and come back only when it got dark or we were hungry. But on a weekend we'd spend half a day at it.

When I was about 12, my mam would send me to the nearest chip shop, probably about 500 metres away, where the queue was out the door and I didn't want to wait. Rather than stand for ten or 15 minutes, I'd run to the next chip shop, more than a mile away. It's things like that make me think it was all about running off extra energy, usually getting out in the fresh air.

WILD CHILD

I had no idea at the time that this was probably unusual behaviour. Whether you want to call it ADHD or not, I don't know. I think it was. In those days I don't know whether ADHD was a thing. Throughout my life I was never diagnosed with anything. And now, at the age of 55, I still have trouble concentrating on one thing at a time.

In the last 30 years I've coached thousands of kids, from Reception up to Year Six. Looking back at what I did on the chip shop trip, I wonder, out of all those children, how many of them, if their mothers sent them to get chips, would just wait in the queue. I'd probably say about 99 per cent of them. Except this scatty one sitting here.