

PAUL SMITH



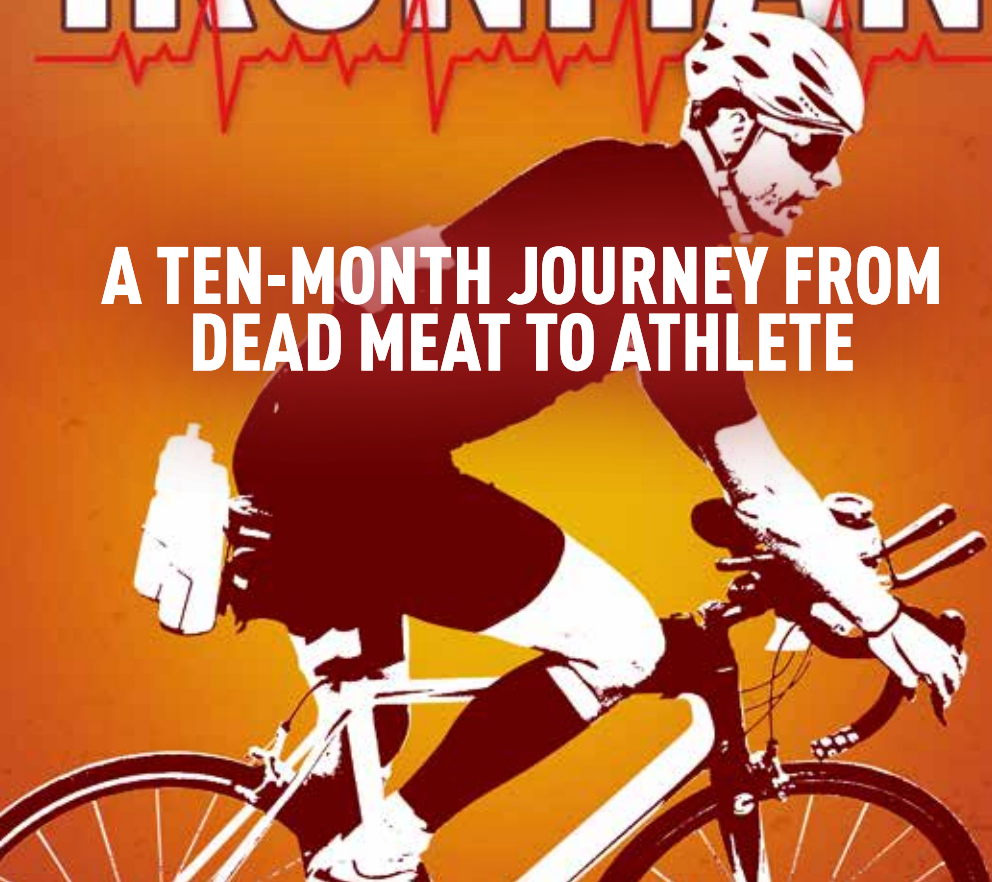
DEAD MAN

TO

IRONMAN



A TEN-MONTH JOURNEY FROM
DEAD MEAT TO ATHLETE





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The Long Road to Diagnosis

THE ROAD to a cancer diagnosis is often a long one and can be full of missed opportunities and regrets. The first time I really felt that anything was wrong with me was back in early 2013 when I started having sporadic bouts of stomach ache. I wasn't truly diagnosed until September 2014 when I went to the North Hampshire Hospital in Basingstoke for the first time and saw the excellent Mr Mohamed. That was about 14 months after it started, but in truth my symptoms probably started long before that.

For as long as I can remember, I would occasionally develop a cramping aching sensation in my lower right abdomen. It was never enough to drag me to the doctor but it was always enough to make me feel a bit unwell and lose my appetite. It would strike every couple of months and last about three or four days until it would subside again. I self-diagnosed myself from the internet with all sorts of random ailments

from irritable bowel syndrome to old age, so I didn't think too much of it.

Over time the bouts slowly started to get more serious and in March 2014 I took my first sick days off work as a result of it. I had developed a shivery fever and a temperature this time around, and as I was feeling pretty run-down I took the Thursday and Friday off to recover. As usual I was fighting fit within a couple of days so was back to work the following Monday.

I had another attack in April; this time it came with less of a gap between occurrences but wasn't quite as severe. I sat at work huffing and puffing, feeling tired and very out of sorts. I mentioned to my colleagues that I wasn't feeling well again and was roundly told to get a grip of myself and man up.

I took their advice and soldiered on, but by now I was thinking that I would need to see a doctor and discuss it. Now, I had self-diagnosed it as gallstones, grumbling appendix and IBS, but being generally of good health I knew that something wasn't right.

I'm a two-day-a-year, if that, type of sick note. I just don't do sick, but that calendar year I was on my sixth day already and there were countless more that I hadn't taken off which maybe I should have, all down to this mystery illness.

It was May when Tom had gone off to Mallorca for his Ironman 70.3. He travelled with family and friends for a week's holiday and several of them were going to do the event. We had talked endlessly at work about his training programme and although work had been busy and he had missed a few crucial late training

sessions as a result, he appeared to be as ready as he would ever be.

In contrast, my sniffs at a training plan had been sporadic to say the least – constant bouts of illness and fatigue had put paid to each attempt I had made to get myself going. The training plan we were following was the Don Fink *Be Iron Fit* programme. It's a structured plan with progressive increments in all three disciplines of swimming, running and cycling to bring you up to the standard of fitness required to complete an Ironman. Two-thirds through the programme was the middle-distance preparation race and this was the point that Tom had trained up to.

The programme is split into three different levels. Just Finish, Intermediate and Advanced; they all follow the same pattern but with different intensities. Tom's brother and his partner had used it to good effect to complete Ironman Zurich and Sweden previously, so we knew it worked. We would train using the Just Finish programme, which aimed to complete the race in between 15 and 17 hours.

Talks were in their early stages regarding completing an Ironman ourselves, but the seed was now sown and we were both nibbling around the edges and sounding out what was really required to go the distance.

On the day of the race I kept an eye on the results as they came in online and could see that Tom had finished in six hours and 54 minutes, a fantastic achievement. I was really impressed and so pleased for him. I couldn't wait till he got back and we could dissect all the gory details.

When he returned to work he looked very well, tanned and even a bit slimmer with an impressive medal to show for his efforts. He had his shiny Ironman mug which he was insisting I fill with tea every five minutes, seeing as I was now very clearly his inferior.

At first he was very understated. 'How did it go?' I'd ask.

'Yeah, it was good mate,' was the nonchalant response, but the more I probed him the clearer it became that it was no walk in the park.

His first fear had been that the sea swim would be non-wetsuit – if the temperature rises to 25 degrees Celsius, the swim is deemed to be too warm for wetsuits so then only swimsuits are allowed. The thing with a wetsuit is that it gives you buoyancy. This has two benefits: it allows you to float in the water and not drown when you are tired, and it keeps you flatter in the water and allows you to swim more easily without using your legs to keep you up in the water. This saves a lot of energy and without a wetsuit a swim of 1,900 metres is a long way for a novice and a daunting prospect, especially in the sea. Tom was saved from a drowning on the morning of the race by the thin margin of only one and a half degrees Celsius.

The 90 kilometre (56 mile) bike leg starts with a long, hard climb out of town into the Tramuntana Mountains, followed by an equally long, fast descent and a quick ride back into the transition area. By his own account he nailed it, overtaking people both on the climb and the descent and then rolling smoothly back into town, at speed, for the run.

That's when it all started to unravel – the run was a straight out-and-back half-marathon along the promenade and coast road. A blisteringly hot and dry run under a cloudless sky with no shade from the 30-degree heat anywhere. It quickly turned into a dehydrated horror show of dripping sweat and never-ending shuffling that wasn't helped by his father, who was sat in a shady roadside bar shouting ever more irritating encouragement with a cold beer in his hand.

But it got done and I could see how pleased he was. This was a real sporting achievement – there was no hiding on that course and you either did it or did not. He did, and I was thinking, 'You know what? I want some of that.' I would just need to man up as recommended by my work colleagues and get down to it.

June came around and it was a hot one, our antiquated office had no air conditioning and was roasting us alive. It was a sauna in there and to cap it all off, I was sore again. I felt exhausted all day and was so hot at night I'd wake up drenched in sweat. One night the bed was soaked so badly we had to change the sheets at three in the morning.

That week at work went very slowly. I just couldn't get myself going, but eventually it was Friday and the whole office were out on the town for a colleague's leaving drinks as he was off to a new department.

It's a good time to say that I am a police detective by trade, so these events always followed the same well-trodden boozy path. A lunchtime start in a pub and then on for a curry or even more drinks if it was deemed by the committee on the day that eating was cheating and was going to be an unnecessary distraction.

We had gathered in a very pleasant shady pub garden by the river at about two in the afternoon. It was a lovely sunny day and was the perfect place to kick off a drunken evening's entertainment, but as I sat nursing my first pint I just wasn't feeling it, the beer tasted sour and I just couldn't get it down. Anyone who knows me will tell you that this is very unusual, I do like a beer. The next round arrived and I made the cardinal sin of asking for a shandy. I knew the abuse that was coming but I couldn't face another straight pint. This alone should have been enough proof of how unwell I was becoming. I made it until about 6:30pm, when I made my excuses as the group were moving on to a curry house. I was a sweaty mess and I felt terrible. My friends joked about how much of a lightweight I was and I wandered back to the train station. I went back home and straight into bed by 8:30.

If I'd only realised then that developing a serious bout of sepsis was lightweight, I may have made the effort to stay out a bit later.

The next day I felt no better and we had to cancel a dinner party with some of our neighbours which had been planned for weeks. My wife Maria took them the foil-wrapped dinner she had prepared for them to have at theirs and I was back in bed by 8pm again.

Reading this it would be easy to say, 'What an idiot, its bloody obvious that you weren't well, why didn't you go to the doctor?'

Well you would be dead right and this time I did. I said to myself if I'm not better by Monday morning I'll go to the doctor. In the time-honoured tradition of men

worldwide who are considering a trip to the doctors, I obviously woke up Monday morning feeling much better, but I did still feel as if I had a bit of a temperature and four days of feeling rough told me I wasn't well, so my day was now mapped out for me.

I was straight up and out of the door at 7:30am because, as with the sorry state of all doctors' surgeries these days, you can really struggle to get an appointment. You have to call up on the day for an emergency appointment and planned appointments are booked for at least three weeks in the future. The phone lines open at 8am and one second after eight they become permanently engaged with no call-back or queueing functions, so you hang up and ring again and again and again. Forty minutes later, if you haven't already succumbed to your ailments, you might eventually get through when, surprise surprise, no appointments are left for that day.

To avoid disappointment the best thing to do is physically drag your sickly body to the front counter at 8am on the dot, so that's what I did. As I drove past the surgery at 7:45am, I could see at least ten people in a dishevelled line outside the door. I parked and obediently took my place in the coughing and hacking line of misery snaking around the building. I reckoned I was number 12 by then as another couple of pensioners had snuck up before I had time to park the car and run back up the road. By 8am, when the doors were ceremonially opened to an ironic cheer from someone further forward in the line, at least six more had joined the party.

We shuffled forward and took our turn to make our demands of the already over-stressed receptionist. It

was 8:10am when I got my appointment for 9:30am, so, already pleased with my day's work, I went home, put my feet up and downed a boiling hot cup of tea before heading straight back out of the door for my appointment. Sitting in the doctors' waiting area, I wondered if I could even feel the pain any more and pressed my fingers into my side hoping to bring it on a bit so the doctor didn't think I was a complete hypochondriac. If the worst it had been in the preceding week was a six out of ten, then today it was only a two, and a two was definitely wasting the doctor's time in my book but I was there so I resolved to see what they had to say.

I was called through and took my place in the customary plastic chair next to his desk as I explained my symptoms. I told him that I had researched it on the internet and thought I had gallstones. He agreed that it sounded very much like it and asked me to lie on the bed so he could examine me.

I pulled up my top, unzipped my jeans, lowering them to my hips, and lay back staring at the ceiling as he gently but firmly felt his way around my abdomen.

'Does it hurt here?'

'No.'

'How about here?'

'No.'

'Here?'

'Yes, a little bit.'

'Ok, how about here?'

'No.'

'If you can just hang on for a moment I'm going to pop out and fetch one of my colleagues.'

Despite the calm in his voice, my head popped straight up from the pillow to look at him as he said, 'I won't be a second.' I watched the back of him scoot out of the door and my very first thought was that it was a good job I came down as there must be something wrong with me after all. I lay back and continued looking at the dog-eared poster of a Bavarian castle that had been taped to the ceiling whilst I waited.

He stepped back into the room with another doctor in tow, whom I recognised from the surgery. The second doctor then got hands on.

'Can you feel that?' asked the first.

'Yes, yes I can,' affirmed the second.

They shared a few knowing glances and nods between themselves and the second doctor said cryptically, 'I would. Yes. Definitely.' It was clear that they had discussed something out of my earshot before returning to the room.

The second doctor left the room and the first told me to get dressed as he returned to his desk. I was starting to feel a bit nervous as I parked myself back in the plastic chair next to him.

As he typed he turned to me and said, 'I don't want you to worry, it may be nothing, but I'm going to refer you to the hospital right now. I can feel a mass near to your appendix and I'd like the hospital to take a look at it today.' Today! Bloody hell, how serious is it, I wondered. 'Try not to worry too much as it might not be anything serious but I'd like the hospital to look at it.'

'Go home and I will make some phone calls and type a referral letter which you can pick up on your way to

the hospital. Will you have any problems getting to the hospital?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I’ll call the wife.’ So off home I went. Thirty minutes later the phone went and the doctor said, ‘I’ve made arrangements, can you get to the ultrasound department in an hour? Please pop back to the surgery and pick up your referral letter on the way. You can read it if you like but there really is no need. If you do read it, try not to panic.’

Oh, ok then.

I called work and told them I wouldn’t be in as I was going to hospital but I promised I would man up and return to work as soon as possible.

My wife Maria rushed home from work and we hot-footed it straight down to the local hospital. Within the hour I was sat with her in the waiting area of the ultrasound on another uncomfortable plastic chair, with both of us wondering what to make of it all. I had no idea that this would turn into a week in hospital and my first painful experiences at the hands of the consultants.