

RUNNING HOT & COLD

WHERE WILL YOUR JOURNEY TAKE YOU?



DOUG RICHARDS

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The first step is the hardest

THE noise from behind was deafening as I scrambled down the steep, rocky slope of the ravine, fighting for breath and praying I wouldn't stumble. Even above the trumpeting and the roaring, my heightened hearing could pick out the cracking sounds as tree branches were torn off and bushes were trampled beneath the feet of the enraged elephants. They were getting closer.

And then I was down, my foot sliding off the side of a rock, tipping me on to my left side. As I hurriedly regained my feet, I looked backwards for the first time since we had spotted the elephants coming towards us. Wide, flared ears, the trunk curling upwards with white tusks waving wildly: the lead elephant was now less than 20 yards behind. Adrenaline drove me on. I knew we were running for our lives, and, at that moment, I heard the rifle shot.

Until then it had been a routine bush walk in the African savannah, learning tracking techniques from our lead ranger, Sander. There were nine of us, all marathon runners in Africa

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for a race, walking in single file with Sander at the front, and Marco, his colleague, bringing up the rear. We had found signs of recent elephant activity in the area, but had failed to spot any from a rocky vantage point known locally as ‘The Lookout’.

With time pressing we had decided to return to our lodge and began to climb out of the wooded ravine. I was immediately behind Sander when we spotted the elephants coming out of the trees ahead of us. We were immediately signalled to descend rapidly into the ravine as the elephants, six in total, lumbered towards us with obvious aggressive intent. This meant of course that I was now at the rear of our group, with only Sander behind me, and, being the oldest member by some distance, I was perhaps a little less fleet-footed than the others.

Now a golden rule of bush-walking is that you should never run away from an aggressive animal as this will only encourage the chase, and they will surely catch you. Sander stood his ground as best he could, urging the rest of us to descend, the steepness of the slope being in our favour as this terrain was more difficult for elephants to run on. Shouting and waving his arms, he tried his best to persuade the matriarch elephant to call off her pursuit but to no avail. When I stumbled, the gap between us and the stampeding elephants was closing rapidly, so it was Sander who fired the warning shot from his rifle into the air. Unfortunately, it served only to increase the rage and the volume of the bellowing behind.

A second warning shot rang out – and this time the elephants hesitated. We didn’t but breathlessly continued our escape to the foot of the ravine and then to climb up the other side to a track from where we would all be rescued by jeep.

Had we not been a group of fit and fairly athletic marathon runners, would the outcome have been the same? Quite probably not. As we waited to be picked up, my heart still pounding in my chest, I said a little prayer of gratitude that all those years ago I had taken the decision to start on my running journey,

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although at the time I had no inkling of the fantastic journey I was about to embark on.

* * * * *

Some people are born to run; not me.

The eldest of three siblings, followed by a sister, Lin, and brother, Dave, I was born in Brighton, Sussex about three years after the war ended. My father had served on a minesweeper and had survived being torpedoed, but had now returned to his true vocation as a steward on the Pullman car train, the 'Brighton Belle'. Mum was the traditional stay-at-home housewife of that era; we never had much money in the family but, as children, we also never really went without.

Although I was apparently quite a chubby baby, a three-month hospital stay with tuberculosis, which included my fourth birthday, left me rather skinny for the rest of my childhood and indeed for much of my adult life. In fact my lack of physicality led to a nickname that persisted through my secondary school years – Duggie Dust.

I went to a grammar school in Brighton where the aggressive style of PE teaching would not be tolerated in today's world. I remember being punched in the stomach for having a grass stain on my white plimsolls and being thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool to see if I could swim. I couldn't, and had to be fished out from the bottom, an experience that has left me with a fear of water near my airways, and as a lifelong non-swimmer. Being a fairly timid child this was not good for my self-confidence and PE became a subject to avoid wherever possible.

This didn't mean I didn't enjoy sport. I was an avid football and cricket fan, and would spend hours every week in the local park with my brother Dave who, although nearly six years junior to me, eventually played both sports at a higher level than I could ever manage.

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At school, our outdoor sports year was split into three seasons: the football season, the cricket season and the athletics season. The first two I really enjoyed, although I always ended up in the matches for those who simply weren't good enough to represent their house at any level. At athletics I was a disaster.

Every year we were presented with A, B and C standards appropriate for our age for a variety of running, throwing and jumping events. I was one of a select group of pupils who never achieved even a single C standard in their whole school career, although it wasn't for the lack of trying. I was just not very good.

And then there were the runs during the winter PE lessons. The teachers would show us a route of two or three miles through the streets of Brighton, and then send us on our way. What they didn't know was that a small group of us (I wasn't the only one) would wait until we were out of sight of the school and then hop on a bus that covered most of the route. The bus conductors knew what we were up to and would helpfully turn a blind eye to our presence. We would then hop off a few stops later and hide behind trees until the lead runners went past, leave it a few minutes, and then run breathlessly back into school.

There was one school running ordeal that was almost impossible to avoid: the annual cross-country race on the Sussex Downs. It was compulsory for all pupils and this time there was no helpful bus service. Resourceful to the end, I found the only way out!

From the age of 13, I had joined the army section of the school's combined cadet force – again, this was compulsory rather than voluntary. Once I had completed my basic training, which was largely marching and rifle drill and learning to fire a .22 rifle, I could then specialise and I chose to join the signals section for one reason and one reason only. Members of the signals section were excused from the annual cross-country race as they were needed to provide communication out on the course in case any of the runners got into difficulties.

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On the academic front, progress was as erratic as my sporting achievements. A career in science was always my goal with chemistry topping my list of favourite subjects. I would spend hours mischievously collaborating with my brother experimenting with a home chemistry set, often to the despair of my parents as foul smells permeated the house. Attempts to launch a mini-rocket housing a snail and to design an underwater chamber capable of sustaining insect life both ended in predictable failure.

At school I opted for A levels in maths, physics and chemistry with a longer-term aim of a university degree in applied chemistry. However, during the first term of my A Level studies I was rushed into hospital with acute appendicitis which in those days meant a ten-day hospital stay, and then several more weeks of recuperation at home.

Looking back at that time now, although I missed several weeks of crucial foundation studies in all of my A level subjects, I still had time on a two-year course to ‘catch-up’ if I really put my mind to it. I obviously didn’t put my mind to it.

Although a very attainable offer for a place at Leeds University should easily have been within my reach, my A level results were an unmitigated disaster and it was time for a major rethink. I couldn’t expect my parents to continue to support me on their modest income so, in the end, the plan was to find a full-time laboratory-based job for a year to gain some experience and earn some money, and then to attend evening classes to retake my A levels and have another go at getting to university.

On my very first visit to what was then called the labour exchange, I was offered a job in a hospital laboratory in Brighton. Not ideal – biology more than chemistry, and biology was my least favourite science subject and not one of my A levels. The money wasn’t great either – certainly below the £10 per week my dad suggested should be the minimum I should consider. On the other hand it would give me valuable laboratory experience,

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and it would only be for a year while I retook my A levels. I took the job and, with that single decision, my whole life changed.

By the time I'd completed my first month's work, and collected the princely sum of £32 for my efforts, I knew I was in a job I would learn to love. I was still getting the buzz that being in a laboratory gave me but now, instead of producing nasty smells at home, I was doing something really valuable within the NHS and feeling a useful member of society. Suddenly three years at university was a less attractive option. I now had an opportunity to embark on a series of day-release professional examinations, and earn a salary at the same time.

To cut a long story short, my one-year temporary job at the hospital eventually became a career that occupied the next 21 years of my life. After completing all of my professional qualifications, I began to develop an interest in medical research, combining this with my routine health service commitments and, several years later, I was awarded a D. Phil. degree by the University of Sussex. From fluffing my A levels, and blowing my chances of going to university as an undergraduate, I had taken an unusual but nevertheless rewarding pathway to becoming Dr Doug Richards.

During the course of that journey, I had met and married Gill, who had joined our laboratory as a junior technician, and we were blessed with first a daughter, Angela, and then two and a half years later, a son, Chris. Sadly both Gill and I had lost our fathers to cancer in the earlier years of our marriage, but my mother proudly saw me through to the completion of my doctorate before she too succumbed to cancer a few years later.

* * * * *

However, I digress. This is a tale of running adventure, so how did my sporting aptitude advance from the evasive practices of my school days through to early adulthood, and eventually fatherhood?

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There had always been an element of endurance in my make-up, just as long as it didn't involve moving at anything faster than walking pace. I enjoyed my time as an army cadet and the annual camps in Norfolk, Dartmoor and the Lake District, as the activities were invariably carried out in military boots and with weight on your back. Nobody expected anything more than a brisk march under those conditions.

As a young teenager I had dreamed of walking from London to Brighton but my parents wouldn't let me, arguing quite reasonably that there was a perfectly adequate train service. But I eventually broke free, dragging younger brother Dave the 80-odd miles from Southampton to Brighton in just three days. He has never quite got over the hike up Portsdown Hill above Portsmouth in blazing sunshine, singing 'Hey Jude' at the tops of our voices, and with only concentrated orange squash to slake our thirsts.

This adventure eventually sparked Dave and I into an annual camping trip around the UK during the summer holidays and, as by now I was the proud owner of a driving licence, the hiking boots that had dragged us along the south coast were now replaced by a car. We would engage in the occasional hike during these trips, but now the measure of enjoyment had become how much ale consumption we could record in the beer book!

Time passed, we both got married within a year of each other, and soon enough our families began to grow, and young children don't leave a lot of time for recreation, particularly as I was also doing a lot of on-call duties through the night at the hospital in addition to the day job. I wasn't entirely physically inactive once I started work. I joined a fledgling Brighton Hospitals football team that had just signed up to the local Sunday league and quite enjoyed the training sessions. However, I rarely got into the team on matchdays, largely due to the fact that I was pretty useless at football. I simply didn't possess enough skill to compensate for my lack of physicality and even

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a brief flirtation with weight-training had little impact on this.

There was a bit more success when I joined the well-established Brighton Hospitals cricket team. At the time they just played a series of friendly games and although I was never considered to be a first-choice batsman or bowler, I was once commended for my 'agility and anticipation' in the field.

There were two highlights of my cricketing career. The first was when I was involved in a century partnership, although my personal contribution was less than 20, and my partner at the other end was a recently-appointed doctor who happened to be a Cambridge Blue at cricket. My second high spot was taking a slip catch to win a match on the last ball of the game.

I knew very little about the catch but the ball hit me squarely in the chest, knocking me off my feet backwards. As I clutched at my ribs in pain, I was as surprised as anybody to feel the ball within my fingers. What made the victory even sweeter was that brother Dave was on the opposition.

While I enjoyed my cricket, the highlight of any game for me was always the visit to the pub afterwards which would often last longer than the match itself. Eventually, the club joined a local league and the cricket became rather more competitive: so competitive in fact that people actually became annoyed with you when you dropped a catch rather than falling about laughing. My cricketing limitations were now much more apparent, and another sporting avenue gradually faded for me.

And then along came badminton. This time it was my brother-in-law, Mike, who was the regular opposition and a couple of times a month we would head off to the local sports centre for an epic hour of combat. We weren't bad, although probably not up to club standard; the important thing was that we were very evenly matched and so the games were tight and competitive every week. After our exertions, we would adjourn for a post-match discussion in the sports centre bar – do you see a theme developing here?

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Then, in early July 1981, a not uncommon and apparently insignificant incident was to change my sporting life forever. An evening television viewing session was suddenly interrupted by shrieks of panic from upstairs. It was another nightmare! I raced up the single flight of 13 stairs to pacify my four-year-old son, Chris. As I tried to calm him with words of reassurance, I was acutely aware that I was having a real struggle to force them out. Just 13 stairs, and a 33-year-old was out of breath! As Chris began to settle, I resolved there and then that this couldn't continue. I must get fitter. I needed to be fitter, not only for my own good, but also for the sake of my young family.

Already lodged in the back of my mind was the method I would use to effect this transformation. It just needed a trigger to bring it to the front, and Chris's nightmare was that very trigger. I was going to become a runner; not a medal-winning, tape-breasting athlete, but one of a new breed of runner who couldn't go particularly fast but who could just keep going and going and going.

Just three months earlier I had sat glued to the television as Dick Beardsley and Inge Simonsen crossed the finish line of the very first London Marathon, hand-in-hand. It was not so much this tremendous achievement that grabbed my attention, but the 6,000 or so brave souls who followed in their wake. All ages, all sizes, all shapes: these people were actually completing a marathon.

Until what was then being described as the 'running boom', the only people I was aware of who ran marathons were heroic figures on black-and-white newsreels who staggered and crawled across Olympic finish lines. Now, it seemed, anybody could run a marathon with some dedication and hard work, and, with my fascination for long distance and endurance events, I felt myself being drawn in.

I didn't hang around. I was a man of action, sort of. I went out and bought a book called *Challenge of the Marathon* and,

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over the course of the next few weeks, I read it from cover to cover, over and over again. I read every running-related magazine article I could get my hands on, diligently drew up training schedules, planned a new dietary regime and visualised myself crossing the finishing line, but I got no fitter. The one thing I didn't actually get round to doing was to start running. Eventually it dawned on me that sooner or later I was going to have to bite the bullet and take that first step. It just needed a spark to set the process in motion and now Chris's nightmare had provided exactly that.

I woke at 7am the following day, informed my disbelieving wife what I planned to do, donned an old T-shirt and some baggy shorts, put on my gym shoes that I used for badminton, and headed over the doorstep as quickly as I could before there was any chance of a change of heart. The route I'd chosen for my first run was around the block and it was one mile long, give or take a few yards. I'd checked the distance several times by driving the route in my car, and I'd also resorted to my cadet training by using a map and a piece of string to make sure; there was no satellite navigation in those days.

The front door slammed behind me and I was away. The first 300 yards were steadily uphill and, before I was halfway to the top, I desperately wanted to turn round and go home. My lungs were burning and gasping for air, my legs were like jelly and no longer obeying instructions and the urge to be sick was overwhelming. Quite how those legs made it to the brow of the hill I'll never know, but make it they did, and as the saying goes, it was all downhill from there.

The remainder of the run passed slowly but without incident, save for the early-morning birdsong being interrupted by the rasping, staccato bursts of my breathing. When I finally reached the haven of my front door, some ten minutes or so later, I fumbled for my front door key in my pocket but even my fingers had stopped working. I can honestly say that I didn't

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enjoy one second of that first run but, once it was over, there was just the hint of a warm glow of satisfaction within. I had run every step of the way and soon I was back in my bed, still gasping, retching and aching but a tiny bit proud of myself. My journey had begun.