

THE SWITCH

FROM 24 STONE TO A LEAN,
ULTRA RUNNING BOXER



KYLE CONWAY

The **PITCH** Report

Love great sportswriting? So do we.

Every month, Pitch Publishing brings together the best of our world through our monthly newsletter — a space for readers, writers and fans to connect over the books, people and moments that make sport so captivating.

You'll find previews of new releases, extracts from our latest titles, behind-the-scenes interviews with authors and the occasional giveaway or competition thrown in for good measure.

We also dip into our back catalogue to unearth forgotten gems and celebrate timeless tales that shaped sporting culture.

Scan the **QR code** and join the growing Pitch Publishing reader community today.



THE SWITCH

FROM 24 STONE TO A LEAN,
ULTRA RUNNING BOXER

— KYLE CONWAY —



Contents

1. The Switch	9
2. Origin Story	23
3. Mallorca Here I Come	36
4. Portsmouth	46
5. Alone	64
6. Help	84
7. Road to Ultra	100
8. Can I Call Myself an Ultra-runner?	113
9. Running into the Future	134
10. Running into the Future, Part 2	151
11. New Year, New Me!	160
12. On your Bike	181
13. A Shot at Redemption!	191
14. Back to Running	207
15. It All Makes Sense Now	221
16. Where Am I Now?	242
Acknowledgements	251

Chapter 1

The Switch

I WAS sweating and I felt bloated. We'd had a few drinks and had eaten. I ate a lot as usual. Even though I knew it wasn't a good idea, and I wasn't hungry any more, I still ate all the Chinese I had ordered and I gobbled down everything the kids hadn't managed to finish.

Now we sat on Simon's sofa. His sofa is one of those big, soft corner sofas that you can just sink into and not move for hours. Despite the comfy sofa, I was in pain. My stomach felt like it was going to pop. I wanted to take my trousers off, but that wouldn't have been appropriate in front of the kids and Simon's wife Kaylee: she might get the wrong idea. I didn't want anyone getting an unwarranted eyeful of my stomach or anything else for that matter.

Along with my physical discomfort, I was in mental turmoil. My anxiety was in overdrive. I really didn't want to see myself in the wedding videos that

Simon had invited us round to view. This was the first showing of his and Kaylee's wedding videos. The ceremony had been in August 2019, and I had the honour of being best man, and now it was December. As I sat in his living room with the wives and children, I had an overwhelming urge to get out of the house.

I can't explain how much effort it took to stop myself from creating an excuse and running away. I couldn't decide which was more embarrassing: me obviously creating a fake emergency to leave, or watching myself on screen. I decided to stay, and if it got that bad, I could close my eyes. Anyway, if I did attempt to run out of the house, I might have had a heart attack, but most probably my current physical situation would have seen me only move a few steps before violently vomiting a vast amount of Chinese food all over the kids.

The reason I was anxious about seeing the recording from the wedding is that I had major issues with my self-image. Over the previous few years I had let myself go and ballooned up in weight to over 24 stone. I hated the way I looked. I couldn't even look at myself in a mirror, never mind spending the next few hours seeing myself in someone's videos and pictures. It made me physically sick (although that could have been the takeaway) and despite the comfortable sofa, I became fidgety and sweaty.

Of course, I did the ‘macho’ thing, and I hid these feelings from the people around me in the room, even though they were the people who loved and cared for me the most. I sadly remember thinking how embarrassed Simon and Kaylee must be to have me in their wedding videos. I remember feeling that my beautiful wife, Charlotte, must also feel embarrassed to be with me, and I felt incredible shame that I was setting a bad example to my two children, Chloe and Archie. I also couldn’t reason in my mind why these people, my family, and friends, would even bother with someone like me.

This is how bad it had become for me at that time in my life, and I can see how incredibly selfish that may seem now.

As I was sitting there fidgety and sweaty, in a pit of equal amounts of anxiety and embarrassment, Simon, being one of the two people that know me better than I do myself, must have realised I was in some sort of turmoil. He asked if I was okay and commented on my sweaty forehead. ‘Bigman! What’s up with you? Are you hot? You’re sweating.’

‘Yeah, I am fine; it’s that shredded chilli beef, it’s doing a number on me,’ I lied. He laughed at this and grabbed me another cherry-flavoured beer that he became a walking advert for. To be fair, they were quite nice.

THE SWITCH

A few things to mention at this point. Number one, my closest group of friends all call me Bigman, and have done for years since we were young. At this time, I was standing at 6ft 4in and over 24 stone. I can't blame them really; when I look back over the years, I have always been taller and wider than them at every age.

It's a strange nickname because it gives me two feelings, depending on how much booze I have drunk. The first feeling is when we have had a few drinks; it makes me feel important, it inflates my ego. It makes me feel, 'Yeah, I'm the Bigman, the boss man, and I can drink more than anyone.' When I say I could drink more than anyone, that is of course a lie, but it didn't stop me trying; my party trick was to drink a pint with no hand by picking the glass up with my teeth and gulping it down in seconds without spilling a drop.

Then the second feeling comes when I am completely sober. Then I know that no one sees it the way I do after I have had a skinful. When I am drunk, my confidence is temporarily inflated, and it's easier to lie to myself. When I am sober, I know I'm called Bigman because I am fat, and that stings sometimes. It especially stings when my wife and kids call me Bigman. My two best friends, Simon and Rob, and I spend a lot of time together as a group with our families. Si and Rob call me Bigman, so all the kids

do, and then all the wives follow suit. Luckily, my wife tends to only call me Bigman when we are with the others; obviously, she calls me it in the bedroom, but that's for different reasons, I wish.

The other thing to mention is that, as soon as I had blamed the chilli beef for my strange behaviour, I thought I could have said I didn't feel well and left. I remember berating myself; in my head, I said I could have lied to get out of this situation. Unfortunately, this type of thought had become quite common. A few years before, I had started to invent excuses to get out of things where my body would be on show, or where I would feel uncomfortable with my weight.

One excuse I used was that I was allergic to chlorine, so I would not have to go swimming with family and friends. My embarrassment about my body was so bad that I used this excuse not to take my kids swimming. It wasn't because I didn't want to play in the pool with them or teach them to swim; it was because this feeling of shame paralysed me. I physically couldn't take my top off in front of anyone – I felt *that* uncomfortable. Unfortunately, my family still think I am allergic to chlorine, so as they read this, I hope they can forgive me and understand just a little why I said it.

So, the time had come. Kaylee and Charlotte had all the kids sitting down, ready to watch the wedding

videos. They were excited to see themselves dressed up. I wish I could have matched their excitement, but I couldn't. The familiar feeling of dread built up. Simon pressed play on the first video. It came as a relief that it was just a recording of the bride and bridesmaids getting ready in the morning. The next one was a scenic shot of people gathering outside the wedding venue.

Then, suddenly, the camera panned to the left, and there I was standing next to Simon in our wedding suits. I was handing him a cheeky shot of whisky from my hip flask, which I had smuggled into the venue. Everyone in the vicinity was laughing at us being caught out having a crafty shot. However, all I could think about was how big I looked compared to everyone else in their wedding finery. I could also see that I was sweating. The sun's rays were visibly glistening on the beading droplets on my forehead as we stood in a stunning vineyard waiting for the bride. This caused another stab of shame and self-loathing.

As we sat there watching, I also felt self-conscious about the best man's suit that I was wearing. I had flashbacks to the suit fittings for the groomsmen; it was clear that the clothes Simon wanted for his wedding were not going to fit me. Everyone had all their suits and trousers on in the tailor's, doing spins and checking themselves in the mirror, and rightly so, the handsome buggers. I sat there watching. I had

the thought running through my head that I might be asked not to be best man anymore because the suits they were wearing didn't fit and they didn't have any in my size.

I saw Simon talking quietly to the tailor while I sat there watching. Simon walked over to me, and I couldn't help but think, 'This is where I get demoted from best man.' However, with a smile on his face, he told me that he was going to have to get my waistcoat and jacket specially made. Bless him, he didn't seem to be bothered at all by the fact he had to do this, but I had a massive problem with it. Simon was having to pay extra money out of his wedding fund because of me and how I struggled to control myself around a buffet, or in a sweet shop, or in a pub. However, I loved him for the way that it wasn't even a problem for him to do this, and I always will. Just writing this on paper at this point in my life, I feel a mix of gratitude and love for Simon with a lining of guilt that he had to do that for me.

There were a few more videos that were played where I featured only in small parts. In many I could be seen in the background eating or drinking. Then we got to the speeches. This was what I was really dreading – watching myself talk and having everyone's focus on me. I really didn't want to see myself, I didn't want to see my face and I didn't want

to hear my voice. More importantly, I didn't want anyone else to either.

I remember the speech I gave very well. I had been worried all day, and I needed to have a few drinks to get up the courage to stand and talk in front of a room full of people in their wedding finery. The expectation for me to make them laugh was massive. To be honest, when you go to a wedding of someone you know very well, a family member or a good friend, the best man's speech is the highlight of the day. It's the only reason why some people go to weddings: it is for me anyway. I think a best man's speech signifies the time when all the serious stuff is done and it's now time to drink and be merry.

I had managed to get to that nice point of intoxication where your confidence goes through the roof, but you are still 95 per cent in control of yourself and your bodily functions. I remember standing there and people laughing at the jokes I had written; I remember handing around several compromising photos of Simon in stages of drunkenness and undress; I handed a picture of Simon's arse to his new in-laws. Hopefully that was the first time they had seen it. When I was giving the speech with my false confidence derived from alcohol, it felt good, I felt good.

However, it wasn't good to watch the whole thing back from where I was now sitting. Probably because

I wasn't drunk. I don't think many people really enjoy watching or hearing themselves talk. A recording of your own voice always sounds different from the voice in your head. While we all watched and the people sitting around me laughed, all I could think was that I looked massive. For some reason, I had the peculiar thought that my arms looked too small for my round body. To me, it looked odd, like when you stick twigs into a snowman's body for arms, old Kyle twig-arms.

The worst thing was that I had the feeling the people who were watching this with me weren't laughing at what I was saying, but they were laughing at the way I looked. They were laughing and commenting on what I was saying, and all I could do was smile along with them and pretend I was enjoying it as much as they were. I stood up and went to the fridge to get some beers, just to have a short respite from watching the videos.

To be honest, that wasn't even the worst video of me by far; the worst one came as a surprise. It had been filmed later in the night after the speeches and the lovely food, a short while after the evening guests had arrived. I was on the dance floor with Simon and Rob; all three of us by this point were quite intoxicated. The video showed the three of us dancing. By this point we had taken our jackets and waistcoats off. I was the only one sweating profusely, my white wedding shirt

had become see-through, and I could see the shape of my body through the shirt.

At one point in the video, I raised my hand in the air, which pulled my shirt up, and I could see my stomach hanging over my trousers. I then attempted a graceful spin only to greet the camera with my sweaty arse crack peeking over my trousers. The room was laughing again, and this time, they were definitely all laughing at me. I was mortified to see this, and a feeling of overwhelming frustration and anger rose up in me. It was the type of frustration that made your hands go numb: the type that makes you want to cry and go home because there is literally nothing you can do. I wanted to leave that room so badly. I wanted to get away from everyone, but most of all I wanted to get away from myself. I went to the toilet and then grabbed some water.

When I came back, a strange thing happened while we watched the videos. I sort of went in on myself and stopped talking. I went into my own head. I had the feeling that I wasn't really there in the room. I stopped watching the videos, even though I was still staring at the TV. I wasn't taking anything in. I just sat in silence, sipping yet another cherry beer. It's strange because I had never gone in on myself like that before and haven't since. I now wonder if this was some sort of trauma response that people go into to protect themselves from further pain.

As I sat in silence, I started to talk to myself in my head. I asked myself: 'Why don't you leave the room?' I answered: 'Then everyone will know how you are feeling.' 'Why don't you want them to know?' This question was the hardest to answer, and I mused on it for the rest of the night. I knew I had the answer, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. What was the problem with my family and best friend knowing how I felt about myself?

The night carried on and we had more drinks, but after a while, I stopped. For one of the first times in my life, I didn't feel like getting drunk anymore. I just wanted to be alone to answer the questions I had begun to ask myself. It kept going around in my head: 'Why don't you want them to know? Is it that it will make you feel weak?' No, that wasn't it.

Kaylee interrupted my thought: 'Bigman, you okay?'

'I'm absolutely knackered,' I lied. I turned to Charlotte and said, 'We will have to make a move in a minute as I need to get to bed.' Simon looked slightly sad as I think he had a later night planned. He had a new blow-up hot tub and wanted us to have a go with a nice glass of whisky. I couldn't think of anything worse, and I'm allergic to chlorine, remember.

Driving home, Charlotte looked across from the driver's side and asked if I was okay. 'You've gone quiet,' she said.

‘I’m just tired.’ That question was still going through my head as I sat in the passenger seat. We got home and got sorted for bed. I changed into some shorts and a t-shirt, avoiding the mirrors in the bedroom as usual. We got into bed and said our goodnights. There was no way I could sleep. I was mentally wired. I kept going over the night in my head like a video on repeat. I went over what I should have said or what I should have done to get out of the situation. I thought about what I should have done to avoid watching the wedding videos in the first place. Then, out of the blue, I thought: ‘You don’t want them to know because you would be admitting you aren’t well.’ And when you are not well you have to do something about it.

This realisation was as if someone had flicked a switch and a light bulb had gone on in my head. I knew I wasn’t well mentally. What I had put myself through tonight wasn’t normal, it wasn’t healthy. Why was I doing this? The biggest driver must be my physical health and the fact I hated the way I looked. I lay there in bed in my semi-drunk and newly enlightened state. I made a promise to myself. I would never let myself feel this way again, especially the way I felt while watching those wedding videos. I was going to fix my issues. This promise seemed to be enough for my mind to give in and I dropped off to sleep not long after.

In the morning, I woke with a terrible hangover. I didn't realise how drunk I had been. As I lay there, I could remember everything that had been in my head before I fell asleep. I could feel the residual mental pain from the night before. I still had the realisation that I needed to change everything. Charlotte interrupted my thoughts and asked if I wanted a McDonald's breakfast, some grease to soak up the alcohol. To my surprise, I didn't want one. And, more to Charlotte's surprise, I said no.

For the rest of that day, I scoured the internet for diet plans, exercise plans, and any quick fixes to get me to lose weight. There was so much information and so many people all over the internet saying, 'This is the only way to get fit' and 'You have to eat this to be healthy.' I was confused. I watched videos of fit people saying diet is the best way. I read people's comments saying weight and strength training is the best way. I listened to people saying cardio is what you need to do to lose the most weight. I didn't know what I was going to do. There was so much to choose from. But I knew I was going to do something.

Looking back on this point of my life, I find it very difficult to talk about even now. I can now see I found it difficult at the time to admit I was not well both mentally and physically. I hated the way I looked and felt. I avoided mirrors and photo opportunities, so I

THE SWITCH

didn't have to see myself or my reflection. I now know I did this as I found it easier to avoid the issues than face them head on. That night at Simon and Kaylee's forced me to ask myself some difficult questions. When I was able to answer them all, I could only repeat that it really was as if a switch had gone on in my brain. Like when you're standing in a dark room and flip the switch and you can suddenly see where you are.

I know it sounds cheesy, and experts say that to change a mindset takes time. They say it happens gradually, but it didn't for me. The switch was flicked, and, at the age of 32, I was going to change. I knew it was going to be the start of my journey to a better me.

To this day no one has known I felt this way, not even Charlotte or my best friends. I suppose they will now after reading this.