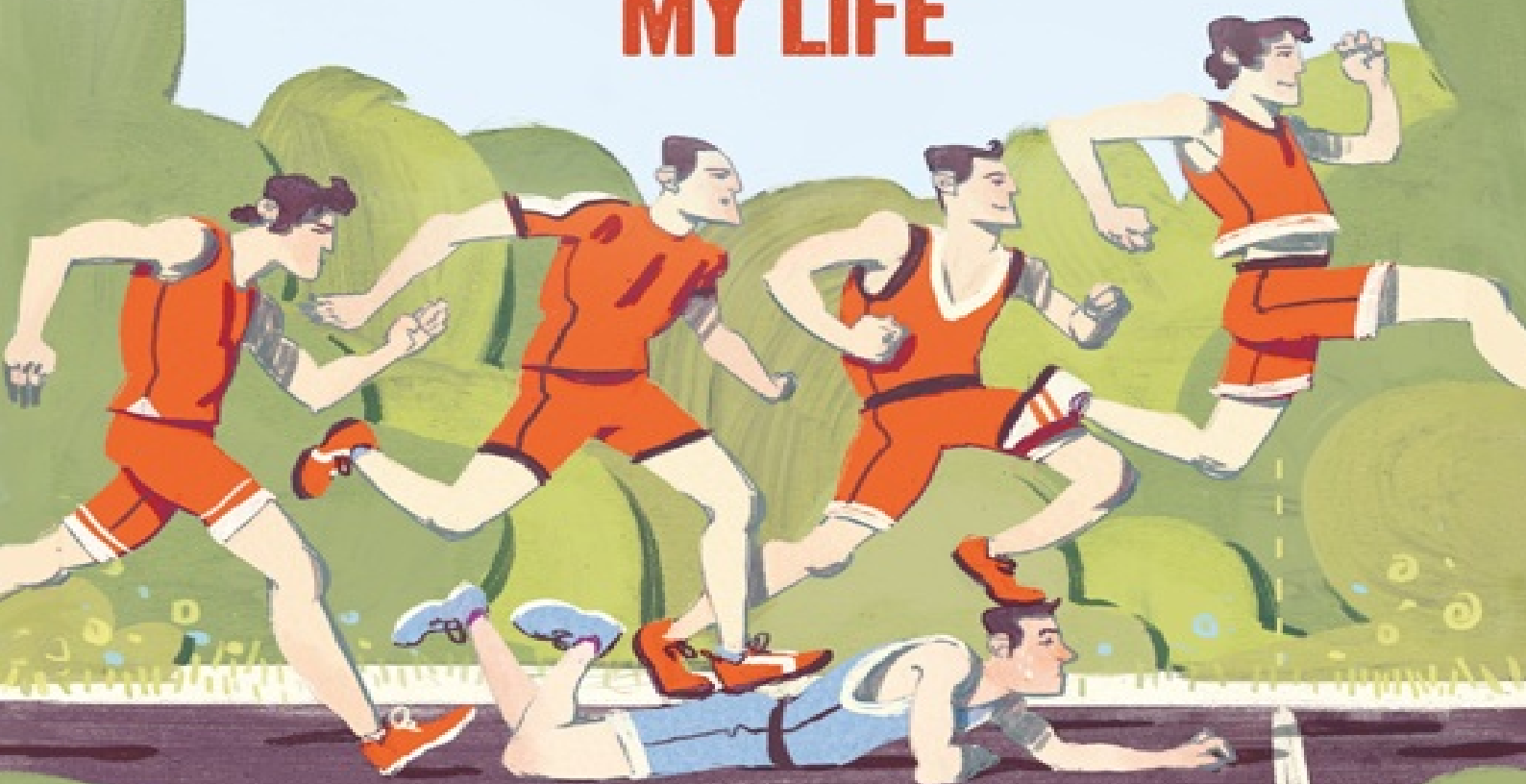


ACCIDENTAL IRONMAN

HOW TRIATHLON RUINED
MY LIFE



Martyn Brunt

Martyn Brunt writes a monthly column for *220 Triathlon* magazine. His obsession led him ~~sell his Mercedes, give away his expensive suit, chuck in his City job and become, in his father~~ words, a ‘god-damned hippy’ (a cycle path designer with a camper van).

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Martyn Brunt

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Chapter 1

I am standing waist deep in the waters of the Main Donau Canal near Nuremberg in Germany. I am clad in a neoprene wetsuit, swim hat and goggles, and my face bears the slightly distracted look of someone with an undiagnosed urinary tract infection. As I stare blankly into the middle distance, like a man modelling pants in a catalogue, I am dimly aware that standing around me are people dressed exactly the same way as me – hundreds of them. However, the presence of what looks like the entire cast of *March of the Penguins* around me is not a cause for joy, because with several hundred swimmers all about to set off at the same time in the same narrow stretch of water, there's a high chance I'll get their *Happy Feet* in my face. My nerves, coupled with having water lapping around my clinkers, have caused me to leak a small amount of wee down my leg, which makes me think:

1. I wonder how many other dirty bastards have done the same, and
2. That actually feels quite nice

Suddenly there is a loud bang, which I assume is the sound of my arse caving in but is, in fact, the start cannon for the 'wave' in front of ours. There are so many swimmers in the canal that we are setting off in waves of a few hundred at a time – and mine is next. If you're reading this in the UK you're probably wondering how you fit hundreds of swimmers into a strip of water about as wide as Peter Crouch lengthways, but here in Germany they do things properly and the Main Donau Canal is wide enough to take ships and, possibly, Peter Crouch sideways. Some of us are standing near the edge on the sloping bank so as not to expend energy treading water and, frankly, drink other people's piss. Others are bobbing about in the water trying to keep their mouths shut, while others stay sitting on the bank silently listening to the power ballads being pumped out of the massive speakers attached to the bridge behind us. Somewhat stereotypically it sounds a lot like David Hasselhoff, although I am wearing a swim cap and my ears are full of water, which probably makes everything sound like David Hoff.

It is now our turn to move forward to the start line, and those of us near the bank glide silently in the water to begin the bunfight for start positions. Thousands of spectators standing on the banks and the bridge cheer as we adopt hard, flinty expressions on our faces in a bid to look windswept and interesting. Starting positions matter, so there is some jockeying to be done. If, like me, you swim front crawl by breathing only to the right-hand side, you want to be on the left-hand side of the starting area so you can see all the buggers around you and reduce the chances of getting clumped about the head by someone swimming on your 'blind' side. If, like me, you are a 'reasonable' swimmer then you want to be NEAR to the front of the wave so you avoid all the doggy-paddler hand-slashers and panickers, but you don't want to be AT the front where the piranha pack lurks, ready to swim over the top of you and make you feel as though you've just emerged from a washing machine. I have carefully selected my favoured position and set about preventing anyone else coming within five feet of it by treading water and surreptitiously booting anyone who comes too close – as well as studying those around me in a bid to clairvoyantly judge their swimming abilities, because you always get some dickhead who puts themselves at the front, sets off like a rocket and then dies on their arse after 200 metres.

Swimming fast for 200m is no good in our present circumstances because ahead of us lies a swi

of 3.8 kilometres. Actually, what really lies ahead of us is 140.6 miles of racing in what is arguably the hardest mainstream sport in the world. Now that you've reached this page in the book I'm going to assume you're not one of those people who is reading this while standing in WHSmith like it's some kind of fucking lending library, and I feel safe revealing to you what I'm doing bobbing about in the waters of the Main Donau Canal. The event that has drawn me here is called an Ironman, an endurance triathlon event made up of a 3.8-kilometre swim, a 112-mile cycle (sorry for jumping between distance measurements, but 112 miles sounds more impressive than 180 kilometres) and a 26.2-mile marathon run (if you want that in kilometres, work it out yourself, I can't be bothered). Ironman races take place all over the world and attract hundreds of thousands of people to try and go around the various Iron courses under the cut-off time of 17 hours. People from all walks of life attempt them, from sinewy European professionals who finish in about 8 hours, to massive optimistic overweight Americans who stagger over the line looking like they've been shagged with a ragman's trumpet – and, of course, skinny, obsessive amateurs who spend half the year training for this race at the expense of holidays, puddings, a quiet life, advancement at work, lie-ins, an easy atmosphere at home, any kind of social life, pain-free legs and money.

This particular race is called 'Challenge Roth' – Roth being the name of the nearest town, and 'Challenge' because, for reasons too tedious to go into, it's not allowed to be called an 'official' Ironman, although it takes place over the standard Iron-distance (it's something to do with 'Ironman' being a franchise as well as a distance, ya-di-ya-di-yada). Normally when you cross the finish line of an Ironman, some hospital-DJ type with a microphone bellows 'You are an IRONMAN' at you, so I'm wondering what I will have bellowed at me when I finish this race – 'You are a Challenger' makes me sound like an unsuccessful space shuttle, while 'You are a Roth-man' makes me sound like a packet of fags. This is not my first Ironman – in fact it's my tenth since 2006, and I have completed them in such dazzling locations as Florida, Canada, Lake Placid, Nevada, Austria, Lanzarote and, er, Nottingham. So far, I have finished every single one in times ranging from 10 hours 20 minutes (Nottingham) up to 12 hours 45 minutes (Lanza-sodding-rote), although this doesn't make them any less nerve-racking and as we wait for the boom of the starting cannon, my sphincter is going from the size of a five pence piece up to the size of a manhole cover, and back to 5p again.

What makes them so nerve-racking is that they are hard. Perhaps you've done one, in which case you'll appreciate the kind of mystique that I'm trying to build here that we are some kind of race superheroes whose tri suits should involve a mask, cape, and some sort of badge for our chests. You don't just turn up at the start of these races on the off-chance you'll finish because they will hurt you badly and leave you sagged on the side of the road looking like a deflated testicle. You have to train for months just to make it to the start line in any sort of shape and, once you get there, then there are a million things that can go wrong during the course of 140.6 miles – punctures, dehydration, crashed panic attacks, injuries, exhaustion, hypothermia, heatstroke, chafed nipples, cramp, the shits, failing to escape the clutches of Scientology and good old fashioned failure.

Most of us taking part will be in the 'complete' rather than 'compete' category. The chances are that the race will be won by some professional with a cool name like Faris or Timo or, er, Chrissi who will finish in 7 hours 59 minutes looking like they've just done a 10k, and who baffle the rest of us by being so good while appearing to have the same number of legs as us. Next will come the elite pros, sponsored athletes and top end 'age groupers' (as we amateurs are known) who will be seeking the minor prizes like winning their age group – for your further edification the entrants into triathlon are usually divvied up into five-year age groups, so you end up competing against people of similar levels of tooth decay. This crowd will be looking to finish in less than 10 hours, will look a little more

dishevelled than the pros but will quickly recover in order to have a good pose around the finishing area in their calf guards, finisher's T-shirt and medal. Looking around me in the water, I can spot a few of these types already and make a mental note to try to thump one or two if the opportunity presents itself – why should I be the only one to feel pain today?

After that will come the phalanx of also-rans whose times range from 10–13 hours and whose bodies range from hefty and muscular to those looking like they need a bloody good dinner, and those of us whose bodies are basically just a collection of fatty deposits and scar tissue. These are the people who have trained hard, executed their race strategy reasonably well, avoided any major catastrophes and for whom the hardest work is yet to come – that of convincing their mates, families and attractive women in pubs that their result was much better than it actually was, using phrases like 'I finished in the top third of the race' or 'I was in the top 50 in my age group.'

Next will come the over-13-hours finishers. Maybe they've had a bad day, maybe it's their first race, maybe they have overcome some huge personal challenge to complete the race, or maybe they've just shit. Either way I always like to give anyone who finishes in this sort of time an extra round of applause (assuming I'm not one of them) because 14 or 15 hours is a bloody long time to be on your feet, let alone swimming, pedalling and staggering about for 140 miles. Another positive side to this group of finishers is that at least they will have the grace to look like they have just done the hardest race on earth and will happily shuffle stiffly over the line caked in snot, dead flies, carelessly applying sunscreen, a warm paste of energy gels, fruit and perhaps some vomit.

The final group to finish will be those who make it round between 16 and 17 hours. I never know quite how to react to people I see lurching for the line with minutes to spare. Are they celebrating their achievement at becoming an Ironman, or are they crushingly disappointed at their time? Are they smiling, or is that the rictus grin of death brought on by some unspecified pain about their personal life? Was this what they were expecting, or have they had the worst day since the manager at the Fukushima nuclear plant said 'Sea looks choppy today'? Do they just want to slink away to their beds or are they happy to be damned with faint praise like 'Good effort' or 'Well tried' by smug gits who have already finished? This group tend to look hunted, relieved, slightly rueful and in massive agony. In parts of their body I don't want to know about.

All entrants though, no matter how unrealistic their expectations, have one thing in common. Something has drawn us here. Perhaps it's the challenge, perhaps it's the finisher's medal, perhaps it's the fact that you will for evermore be known as an 'Ironman' (though since Robert Downey Jr. got involved in the act it's hard to describe yourself as such to kids without coming across as a massive tool) perhaps it's the prize money or perhaps, as in the case of my friend Mark, it's because he hopes it will make girls want to touch his cock.

In my case, it's complicated, which will become apparent throughout this book should you be able to stand to read any further. The title of this book is *Accidental Ironman*, but I don't want to conjure up a picture that I've just wandered up to the start of this race while I was out fetching a paper. The accident in question is more a reference to the fact that I never meant to start doing any of this. For 30 years of my life I had less interest in sports than Louis Spence has in *Nuts* magazine and my presence at these races comes as a constant source of bewilderment to me, and to anyone who has known me no longer than the past ten years. Having given it some thought for the purposes of financial gain (the book) I've realised I partly do it for egotistical reasons, partly to make up for previous sporting failures and partly because I thought I'd get the kind of body that meant that my buttocks would be so firm I'd never need to use a nutcracker again. What I've actually ended up with is a body that looks like an anglepoise lamp from Ikea, probably with a name like Tvátt. It is called *Accidental Ironman*.

because I just sort of drifted into this sport without ever really stopping to wonder what I was doing. Following the fabulous (four times Ironman World Champion) Chrissie Wellington's book *A Life Without Limits* I had contemplated calling it *A Life Without Talents*. Or it could equally have been called *My Struggle*, although I was advised it wouldn't sell so well in Germany. Hopefully, the title does at least go some way to explaining that I don't really know what I'm doing this for and, more specifically, that I don't really know what I'm doing here in the Main Donau Canal, surreptitiously kicking some French bloke who is trying to nick my start place and generally treating the water around me as my own private country with an incredibly strict immigration policy.

Now you've got this far into the book and I can be absolutely certain you're not some commuter killing time by leafing through the sports books section of the station newsagents (or have I been categorised in comedy – or perhaps 'Bargain Bin'?) we can relax a little and get to know each other some more. Not that this will lead to any lessening of writing standards by the way, oh no, I've determined you shall have value for your money and if you feel at all short-changed by the quality of my words and punctuation I've used please feel free to write to me at: M Brunt, A Yacht, Somewhere, the Bahamas. Anyway, now that we can be free with each other, I am happy to tell you that I'm here because I'm told this particular race is a fast one, and I am thus likely to come away with a very impressive time, always assuming I don't cock it up. I've trained quite hard for this race and my coach Dave, a man about whom you shall hear more, has terrified me with tales of what future training regimes he will put me through should I not return victorious. A couple of years ago the all-conquering Chrissie Wellington set a new record for this course, which made all sorts of people like me put aside our usual below-par work ethic and think 'Hmmm, I could crack that race out with the usual level of effort and get a much faster time than usual.' Right? We'll see ...

I'm also here because I have a bunch of mates who have also been drawn here by the prospect of turning up and knocking out a fast time with the minimum of effort, and the time has come to introduce them to you:

1. Mark Stewart, a gadget-obsessed sex pest whom I've known for ten years and who has become one of my closest friends, despite him continually, narrowly defeating me in races. Physically he is the tall, sinewy type: if Andy Murray ever went missing for 30 years and the police released one of those e-fits that tried to show him as he'd look at that age, Mark would get rounded up sharpish. He's actually a very good athlete who has the ability to hit his peak fitness for races at exactly the right moment, and a complete inability to complete any race without having to stop at some point to do a massive dump. Mark is starting in one of the waves behind me and currently flapping about in transition (the area where bikes and kit are stored) trying to sort out a puncture he seems to have acquired on his bike's front tyre (actually the way I've written the 'seems to' implies I am to blame in some kind of Dick Dastardly, race-nobbling act of vandalism, but I swear I was nowhere near his bike your Honour). Mark's least favourite part of the race is the swim and he has been crapping himself all morning about the prospect of being stuck in a canal with a load of neoprene clad knees and elbows, and I have been soothing his nerves by saying things like 'Not much room is there?' and 'Looks punchy to me.'
2. Joe Reynolds, a man who, on paper, is the most exciting human being in the world given that he is already an Ironman, he works in Formula One racing, and he once appeared in a band on *Top of the Pops* – and a really cool band too; he was the saxophone player for eighties ska legends The Selecter, playing on their classic anthem 'Three-Minute-Hero', which already

gives him masses more credibility than Dustbin Bieber or anyone who's ever slithered into our realm via *The X Factor*. On top of all this, Joe has five daughters – yes, five – all of whom range from loud to absolutely deafening. Joe tends to be at the slower end of the field and is expecting to finish somewhere around the 14–15 hour mark but, to be fair, if you had five gobby daughters you'd want to stay out on the course and get a bit of peace and quiet, too. Physically Joe is the short, sinewy type and in terms of what he looks like, picture if you can a slightly bewildered looking Ferrero Rocher. Joe is currently swimming for his life because he is in one of the waves in front of me, and he too likes the swim part of the race least of all. I have been soothing his nerves all morning by saying things like 'I wonder how long it will take me to catch you and swim over the top of you?'

3. Steve McMenamin, a gristle-kneed former-rugby-player-turned-swimmer who hails from that well known part of Ireland known as Coventry. Steve is someone I seem to have known all my life, although I can't actually remember when I met him. As well as being one of the funniest people on the planet he constantly baffles me with how he managed to persuade his wife, Kay to marry him, given how nice she is. Steve now lives in Brighton and once persuaded me to swim the Channel with him (more on that later). He's also the only Olympic Torchbearer I know, having carried it through Sussex for a mile, trying desperately to ignore the mobile phone constantly going off in his pocket with texts from me, Mark and his other mates urging him to be the first person to trip over, drop it or set fire to the next runner. Steve is an extremely good swimmer and is also out there somewhere ahead of me, ploughing through the field and any unfortunate flounders in his way, and is probably relieved to be under way to escape the jokes about being India's number-one triathlete. Before leaving home he ordered some Irish flags for his family to wave, only to open them in Germany and discover that he'd been sent Indian flags by mistake, so as far as we were concerned he is the subcontinent's sole representative in the race and he has endured four solid days of curry-based piss-taking.

And then there's me, Martyn Brunt, currently awaiting the cannon's boom while burdened with the weight of expectation and teetering on the edge of self-befoulment. Through years of self-sacrifice and gritty determination I have carved out a reputation as one of the sport's top mediocre performers whose only talent appears to be being able to tolerate limitless amounts of pain (although not my own). My kicking has seen off Monsieur Froggy and as the seconds tick down to the start it occurs to me to wonder whatever happened to Katie Laws who was the first girl I fancied at school, what the capital of Peru is, and is it just me who thinks that Alan Sugar looks like a dog's bollock balanced on top of a suit? None of this has any relevance to the race I'm about to do, but it just goes to show how your mind wanders when you're nervous.

I check my watch, wondering whether to start it now or leave it until the cannon actually goes off so I will know to the precise second how much I'm failing my target times by throughout the race. These final seconds before the start are the closest you will feel to your fellow competitors, a kinship based on shared suffering, shared nerves, shared effort and the shared joy that completing this kind of event weirdly brings you. Triathlon is an egalitarian sport that makes little distinction between the poor (me), the rich (my friend Neill Morgan), the exciting (Jenson Button), the dull (Neill again), the upper classes (my friend Will Kirk-Wilson), the lower classes (anyone from Bedworth), the good (Chrissie Wellington), the bad (Ponce Armstrong), the old (Alistair Brownlee), the young (Jonny Brownlee), the fat (my friend Tony Nutt), the thin (Tony's hair), the popular (Spencer Smith) and the

friendless (me after this). I like to think that something we've got in common is a vague sense of wonderment about why we're doing this. Why get up at 5.00 a.m. to go swimming? Why give up a nice cozy bed to go cycling for hours in all weathers? Why go swimming in a freezing lake? Why run so far or fast that you virtually collapse? Why give up your night out because you are too tired to move – or because you have to train the next morning?

Like most triathletes in training for an Ironman, I never really dwell on 'why', being naturally more interested in 'what'. What was my time for that last lap? What is the weather going to be like for the ride? What kit should I wear? What can I do to get stronger towards the end of races? What will happen to my weight if I eat that biscuit? What is the price of those wheels? The only 'why' that I've ever dwelt on is 'why don't girls seem impressed when I tell them about my marathon splits at the end of an Ironman ...?' However, at the start of any race there's nothing like having the feeling you've been bitten off more than you can chew to give you a moment of self-awareness and to question what on earth you think you are doing! Am I here because I want to fit in? There's certainly part of me that enjoys fitting in with people whose athletic achievements I admire, and I enjoy listening to someone talking about being 'on the rivet on the K10/10 in a 53/12' and knowing exactly what they are talking about. Or am I here because I want to stand apart? Try as I might I can't help but glow with smugness when I hear someone talk about going to the gym or jogging a Park Run as the pinnacle of their fitness without thinking 'Christ, that's not even a warm-up!' And, yes, I confess to feeling shameless superiority when I'm out in public and I see the undulating blob monsters waddling their way into certain tax-averse coffee shops and fast food chain restaurants, taking pleasure in thinking 'I'm not like you – and plug up your tophole fatty, you're eating too much.'

Frankly, I don't know, but I wish I could understand, why I've been so cold while cycling that frost formed on me, so hot after running that I jumped into someone's ornamental fish pond, and so tired I've fallen asleep in a plate of food. I've been soaked and sunburned; I've had heatstroke and hypothermia; I've crashed, fallen, punctured, tripped, collapsed, been hopelessly lost, had endless bollockings from my wife for being late for things, been lectured by a beach lifeguard for 'causing distress to the public' and cautioned by the police for exposing myself to a passing coachload of pensioners while urinating up a tree. Maybe by the end of this book my reasons for participating in this nonsense will be clearer to both of us (not that you give a toss probably but I'd like to know).

And is it just me that wonders why, in the name of sweet baby Jesus, I'm about to do what I'm about to do? As the last few seconds of inactivity tick by, I can't help but wonder how big Katie Law's breasts are these days and whether anyone else out there is an *Accidental Ironman*.

BOOM!

Chapter 2

Steve Elliot
Craig Freer
Mark Edwards
Graham Harris

Okay, there go the good footballers. I expected them to be picked first because, even at the age of seven, they have that easy ability to control a ball with their feet without looking at them, a handy turn of pace, the ability to make space for themselves and the confident swagger that comes with being good at something that everyone wants to be good at. The bastards. Steve especially has talent and will go on to play at county level and be scouted by Coventry City before vanishing somewhere into the masses of kids who don't make it, possibly as a result of pissing his talent up the wall. He's good, he knows it, and behaves accordingly, treating weedier kids with disdain and having girls waiting to carry his bag for him. Craig too has talent and will also go on to play at secondary school and county level. He's less showy than Steve but a more prolific goal-scorer and much nicer with it, which makes his loss to cancer as a teenager all the sadder. Every kid has their nemesis at junior school, and Mark Edwards was mine for a time. The same age as me, similar looks to me, same interests as me, lived very close to me and our parents knew each other, which meant we often went on day trips together. We were sort-of friends in an uneasy kind of way, but rivals too and the occasional fights between us tended to be more vicious than any fights with other kids. And of course he was a much, much better footballer than me.

Darren Rose
Guy Slater

And there go the goalkeepers. Again, no surprise that they have been selected by the respective team captains picking their teams from the knot of pale, scrawny schoolboys standing on a muddy football pitch behind the main school building. Teams need goalkeepers and these two seem keen to do it, although Darren is actually quite good. I am not good as a goalkeeper, being poor at catching, kicking and throwing and disliking being in the way of a wet leather ball that assumes the weight and velocity of a small planet when slogged at you from ten yards away. Guy was my best friend at junior school which meant we spent a lot of time riding bikes together and fighting. A local farmer's son, I can still picture him wearing the same baggy, grey home-knitted sweater to school every day (this was the early seventies when homemade clothes were standard stuff). Why he wanted to be a goalie I can't imagine and we lost touch soon after we went to different secondary schools, though his absence from any First Division teams throughout the eighties and nineties suggests he may have dropped his interest soon after – as well as seemingly dropping every cross I recall him flailing for.

Timothy Lloyd
David Homer
John Kerr
Craig Burden

Fair enough, these are the fast running kids who seem happy enough to peg it up and down the pitch all afternoon. Timothy is the short, squat, burly type of sprinter; David the tall, long striding choppy handed sort; John his short-arsed equivalent and Craig the bandy-legged sort who looks like an egg whisk when he runs. Every team needs players with pace, although ball control is definitely a secondary consideration to speed with these four. Tim is a nice lad whose mum knows my mum and who regularly plays at my house, David too is an inoffensive, slight sort of kid who seems more keen on being a runner than playing football. John is a spiteful little turd who should change his first name to 'Juan', while Craig is the other candidate I have for 'best friend at school' and is one of those cheery rascal types who always seems to be up to something but gets away with it by being cheeky and funny. He also has an older brother who is his chief supplier of *Penthouse* and *Knave* magazines.

Robert Greenway
Christian French
Richard Lee
Paul Randle

Hmm. These are more your solid, workmanlike types, not particularly skilful but able to control a ball, pass it, and head it without squinting or shrinking their heads into their necks like a turtle. I'm not particularly surprised these have been picked ahead of me because they definitely try harder than I do and get more involved in any game of football than I do. In my mind's eye both Robert and Christian have massive heads (physically I mean, I'm not suggesting they bragged a lot), which may account for their abilities in the air. I don't remember much about Richard and Paul other than a vague memory of them believing that they were much better at football than they actually were. Paul went to the same secondary school as me but we were in different classes so we might as well have been different Zimbabwean political parties for all the contact we had with each other.

Michael Morton
Paul Morton
Kevin Harborne
Harman Howland
Shaun Lester

Okay, I had maybe half-hoped I might have been picked ahead of a couple of these because I am slightly self-delusional and because we're now getting down among the crappier choices. None of these five has any particular footballing ability although, to be fair, they are at least keen on the sport. Kevin particularly wants nothing more than to be a professional footballer and lives near Coventry City winger Tommy Hutchison, making him a popular supplier of autographs, written in suspiciously childlike handwriting. Sadly, he is denied his dream by being as good at football as Girls Aloud are at potholing. Michael and Paul are the most competitive pair of siblings since Venus and Serena Williams, and it's a toss-up whether it's safest to have them on opposite sides kicking lumps out of each other, or on the same side kicking lumps out of others. And each other.

Mitchell Edwards
Robert Fox
Darren Miles
Shaun Moorcroft

Now I'm worried and any ego I had developed by the age of seven has been seriously bruised that I have not been picked in with this group. Mitchell Edwards can run fast but isn't interested, Robert is ponderous and couldn't hit a cow's arse with a banjo, and Shaun's only claim to fame is to be a cousin of Great Britain's star Olympic runner and Coventry Godiva Harrier Dave Moorcroft. (As an aside, I now know Dave well, having become a Godiva Harrier myself, and he tells me there is no Shaun Moorcroft in his family, the little liar). Every street has its trouble family, and the Mileses are the trouble family in ours. Of the four sons, Darren is the worst so I can only assume he has been picked ahead of me through fear, although his team will soon be a man down after he gets sent off for hacking someone down, calling the teacher a wanker, or just jumping over the fence and running off.

And so, we are down to the last two, and their names are Andrew Owen and Martyn Brunt. The former is a timid but funny kid whose Italian mum used to stand at the school gates at home-time shouting: 'Annderrew, Annderrew, hurrury up or you getta no sweets' and who had, according to me, a 'wooden buster'. And then we have Martyn, the worst footballer you will ever see in your life. Not only does he not particularly like the game, but he lacks even the most basic of skills, seemingly unable to control his feet without having to stare at them, unable to summon up the energy to leave the ground when jumping, and believing that the best tactic is simply to follow the ball around the pitch – or more accurately follow where the ball has just been around the pitch. Andrew and Martyn are the last two kids standing on the muddy pitch behind the main school building. The team captains would be quite happy not to select either of them but are forced to by the PE teacher, so it's now an exercise in damage limitation. Which of these two will be the least inept? The captains are receiving words of advice from their assembled team about the various pitfalls of picking either one of them, and in truth whoever is picked will have as much impact on any game as Darren Anderson had on, er, any game. However, it does matter. It matters very much to Andrew and Martyn because neither one of them wants to be 'Last Pick' – the lowest of the low, rejected by all. Whoever is picked will sprint over to their new team, pathetically grateful for the crumb of consolation they have been fed. Whoever is not picked will not even have their name called out, they will just be stared at accusingly by the captain lumbered with them who will just say, 'Come on then' before turning around and running off. And then it comes ...

Andrew

If you grew up in the early seventies as I did, then this particular form of torture may be familiar to you. PE lessons consisted solely of football played between teams of about 25-a-side with a ball so heavy that if punted at you it would probably take your head clean off your shoulders. Teams were picked by choosing two captains (normally the two best players) and lining them up facing the clut of skinny, malnourished bags of bones they had to choose from, whereupon the captains would make their selections by pointing at their chosen players with increasing indifference as they went through the ranks. Inevitably the best players got hoovered up first, and then so on until it was just me and some kid with a built-up shoe. This sadism was presided over by the PE teacher, Mr Williams, a football fanatic and all-round bastard, and possessor of a tiny head yet enormous nose with cavernous nostrils.

Mr Williams was Welsh and, this being the early seventies meant that Welsh rugby was in its pomp. Mr Williams, though, was from north Wales and a 'devotee of the round ball', which meant we got nothing but football all year round. This was pretty good news for most kids because it was the era of the first superstar footballers of Manchester United, Liverpool and Arsenal, with players like Kevin

Keegan, Lou Macari, the Greenhoffs, Steve Heighway, David Fairclough, Sammy McIlroy, Charlie George, Malcolm Macdonald et al, struggling to get off the ground under the weight of their sideburns and growing perms so big that they obscured entire stands. Even Coventry City – my team – had a couple of good players, with Ian Wallace and his huge, ginger, bepermmed scalp dazzling defender along with the aforementioned Tommy Hutchison, who could probably still get in the side now if I fancied it.

This football focus also had its drawbacks. My school, Allesley County Primary, lay in a village right on the outskirts of Coventry and each year it would hold a school sports day full of such athletic events such as the 100m sprint, long jump into a dogshit-filled sandpit, shot-put with a beanbag, high jump over a couple of poles and a rope, and a longer run of some unspecified distance that involved a lap of the playing field. No training was done for this because Mr Williams didn't like anything that wasn't football, so our school was not generally a hotbed of athletic achievement. In fact, about the only non-football exercise we got as kids in the early seventies was from trying to outrun creepy TV celebrities. We did get to have a go at the occasional alternative sport and I vividly remember that in the wake of Virginia Wade's win at Wimbledon we had a 'tennis lesson' – which involved trying to hit an airstream ball against a wall with a wooden paddle. If you managed it twice you could have lessons, and if you didn't it was back to the classroom and don't let the doorknob hit you in the arse on the way out. Needless to say I was back inside doing times tables before you could say 'Navratilova' and a possible future tennis great was lost to the sport, although sitting on 'Brunty's Bulge' doesn't sound quite as appealing as 'Henman Hill'.

What I've done in the past couple of pages is to try to set the scene for the rest of this book (and perhaps, pique the interest of any passing psychiatrist) by underlining that, from a very early age, I was deemed as being *shit at sports*. Mostly this was because I was *shit at sports*, although I grew up slightly resentful of the fact that I was deemed *shit at sports* because I was shit at football. It was some years before people learned that I was also shit at rugby, cricket, hockey, athletics, squash and tennis. Whether I was shit at them because I already lacked self-belief in my sporting abilities, because I was genuinely shit at them, is one of those chicken-and-egg debates. Actually, no it isn't. We're friends now and I can truthfully confess to you that I was indeed *shit at sports*.

Things did not improve when I went to secondary school – although at least I was spared the hate of football, because at my new grammar school they didn't play it, no doubt considering it a pastime for pikeys and chavs. Instead – horror of horrors – they played rugby. I didn't think it was possible for me to dislike playing any sport more than football, but I quickly realised how wrong I was the first time we were made to play rugby. It took precisely one lesson for the sports master to work out exactly who were going to be the gentlemen in the team in the years to come and who was going to be condemned to fruitlessly farting around on the outfield with the 'other ranks' for the next fifteen school terms. The rugby team at school seemed to be populated entirely by thick-necked, slow-witted types called Ollie or Will, and their attitude towards those of us who weren't interested in rugby – as well as the general attitude towards girls, art, music, any sport that wasn't rugby, anyone slightly camp and thus a bit gay, and anyone with vaguely dark skin – did not make me yearn for their company.

On the plus side, though, the sports master, Mr Jones (another Welshman, although at least the other one was the real deal, having played rugby for Wales), didn't want us lightweights getting in the way of his fit, committed, well-drilled bunch of homophobic racists. So we were spared the humiliation of having to play in the same games as them, and were instead banished to the fringes of the playing fields where we were made to play endless games of rugby, largely at walking pace and supervised by the music teacher, Mr Sutton. He was probably as uninterested in the whole process as we were – and

at least we got to stand around with our hands on our knackers when it got cold, which he couldn't do without ending up on some kind of register.

In the summer term, thank the Lord, the school switched to cricket – which was at least a sport I liked, albeit still one I was shit at. This was a new experience for me and I recall my first feelings of frustration that here was something I liked, wanted to do, and yet couldn't get into the school team because of a crippling lack of talent. I was bloody awful at batting – the highlight of my batting career being a match-winning stand of 51 with a lad called Jamie Walker, with him getting 50. However, I was a reasonable fielder and, dare I say it, a not entirely bad bowler, capable of maiden overs and the odd wicket. I didn't have a particular style, although I had one delivery that was a full toss that used to lure batsmen into taking a big swing, only for the ball to suddenly drop from its trajectory like a turd dropping out the back of a cow and flop past their swishing bat on to the wicket. Around the time that I was at my most keen there was a programme on the television called *Bodyline*, which dramatised the controversial England victory in the Ashes in Australia when Douglas Jardine's men started pelting Don Bradman and the Aussies in the ribs and faces. The bowling attack was led by fast bowlers Harold Larwood and Bill Voce, and I became obsessed with turning myself into the next Larwood. I spent hours in the back garden slinging balls at the shed, giving myself a back so hunched my mum started ironing my shirts with a wok and I had to stick my thumb up my arse to get my school tie on. The attempt at becoming the next Fred Trueman petered out eventually, leading to precisely no wickets but ending with the satisfying achievement of hitting my friend Paul Etherington squarely in the balls with a full toss that saw him plummet to the ground and vomit lavishly all over the stumps.

I should point out at this moment that I am not a descendant of a particularly sporty line. My mum was a figure-skater and gymnast when young, making her by far the most accomplished sportsperson in the whole family, and she actually met my dad while ice skating when he swept her off her feet. I don't mean this romantically, I mean he literally swept her off her feet by crashing into her.

My dad's sporting talents were less obvious. Throughout my childhood he claimed to be a tennis player of some renown and we used to play games together in my early teens. However, after he passed away a few years ago my mum debunked the myth that he was any good by saying that he was deemed the best player of their circle of friends simply because he possessed a racket with all the strings in it, had tennis balls that hadn't had all the hair thwacked off them, and didn't have a fag on the go while playing, unlike my Uncle Toms (plural). Throughout his whole life I never knew him break into a run, and I only ever saw him swim once when we went on holiday to America and he swam by bobbing about face down in a San Diego swimming pool like the body from an improperly weighted Mafia hit. He did own a bike, but his idea of cycling was to pedal uphill to the next village, three miles away with Uncle Tom number one, stop at the Bull and Butcher pub, and then freewheel all the way home. On the occasions that I was allowed to go along on my Raleigh Commando bike (with twist-grip gears in the handlebars no less) I was usually away off at the front on the way up the hill, made to sit outside with a lemonade during pub time, and then left for dead on the way back as they hurtled back down the hill, Uncle Tom only stopping if his Benson and Hedges went out.

Even my wider family lacked any sporting heroes. My Grandad Jack was a physical training instructor in the army until a German machine-gunner put paid to his kneecaps, although this didn't stop him cycling between Birmingham and Walsall every morning after the war to his job as a steam engine driver. As he said himself, all that metal around his legs made him much better at playing the spoons. Grandad Albert had played some football in his time but his real passion was gardening. He grew the largest vegetables that the Birmingham Council allotments ever saw. I would spend hours with him in his garden, watching him swapping trays of seedlings with fellow green-fingered

enthusiasts to the extent that I grew up thinking that seeds and cuttings were some sort of illiquid currency. Later in life he was frustrated by his inability to do the things he used to do – like bomb the Japanese.

The only other member of my family worth mentioning is my cousin Sharon, who was so fat that if she fell on her back she'd rock herself to sleep trying to get back up again. At one point she topped 20 stone and this was back in the seventies when seeing fat biffers waddling around with their buttocks on show was unusual enough to be worthy of comment from passers-by. We were not close cousins due to her being a good bit older than me, and a spoilt miserable sow – you'd think if someone is going to be overweight then at least they'd have the common decency to be jolly. I well remember coming home one day from school to be met by my dad standing in the drive, looking very solemn and saying: 'You know how your cousin Sharon was told to lose five stone or die? Well I'm very sorry to tell you that ... she's lost five stone.'

My dad was a man of many talents, mostly associated with fine wine, jazz, elegant suits and being extremely popular. There was one sport he was committed to though, and that was golf. American comedian Robin Williams once described golf as the only time a white man can dress like a black pimp and get away with it, and my dad took this to extremes, cutting a singular figure at Coventry Hearsall Golf Club in his red plus-fours, argyle socks, diamond-patterned Pringle sweater and large American baseball cap. Like most club golfers he was mildly obsessed with the game and all the cupboards in our house seemed to be full of individually wrapped Slazenger golf balls. I wish I'd kept a few now because they're dead handy for rolling around under your foot if you've got plantar fasciitis.

In truth, he wasn't a bad player and reached a handicap of about 10. Once he even won a club trophy, in which Mum used to keep her sewing kit, much to his annoyance. Inevitably I was also drawn into this world and was given my first set of clubs at the age of about six, and given 'lessons' by my dad. Dad was not the most patient of souls, and 'lessons' would mostly involve watching me hack away at the ball like a lumberjack attacking a tree whereupon he would bellow 'NOOOO! Liar this!!!', grab the club off me and then proceed to shank the ball into some trees before claiming I had 'put him off.'

In recalling this, I've just remembered the one and only time Dad tried to teach me to play cricket when I was about eight. God knows why he did this because he couldn't play the game for toffee but he decided that he would bowl and I would bat, whereupon he launched a ball at me that Jimmy Anderson would be proud of and which cracked me so hard on the shin that it made me dry heave. Unfortunately for him, my mum had just wandered into the garden and witnessed the spectacle of her son being poleaxed, whereupon she raced across the lawn with a roar, tore one of the stumps out of the ground and flung it at my dad like a Zulu warrior, spearing him in the knee. He collapsed howling in agony and was locked out of the house while I was carried inside for ice cream and sympathy.

Actually, I wasn't bad at golf and managed to battle my way to a single-figure handicap, although I was never a natural and didn't enjoy it enough to do any practising. I was capable of the odd good round and was particularly good at driving off the tee and belting the ball for miles down the fairway. The trouble was I used to putt the same way. I ended up playing most weeks with Dad from the age of about eight all the way through to my mid-thirties when he became too ill to stay out on the course for long. I still miss those rounds with him, crushed as I was by the embarrassment of walking down a fairway next to a man in multicoloured knickerbockers and a flat cap with a bobble on it. I never won anything, and in fact the only real highlight I remember was once playing with a pro called Tim Roux and some other friends at a course called Hollinwell in Nottinghamshire. Hollinwell was very nice and very posh, with a final hole that finished right in front of a large clubhouse with a huge conservatory.

and patio. I had had an atrocious round, spraying balls all over the shop and playing what was generally known as ‘Military Golf’ (left, right, left, right). Having done nothing of any note for the whole game, on the final hole I produced a shot of dazzling brilliance that pitched in the centre of the green with backspin and rolled up to about two inches from the pin. As we walked on to the green the patio was thronged with people having their evening gin and tonics, and I received a round of applause from the crowd, politely acknowledging it with a modest wave when I walked over to my ball. This led Tim to turn to me and say: ‘you wanker.’

University is often the place where people discover or build on their sporting passions, but I continued my indifference all the way through my studies. I spent three years at Liverpool University between 1986 and 1989, having scraped there courtesy of an A-level in General Studies, which is the equivalent of being given a certificate after a pub quiz. I elected to prolong my education and be surrounded by girls and subsidised entertainment, rather than go straight to work in an office, factory or meat storage facility. During this period the only time I remember ever getting sweaty was while trying to unhook a girl’s bra, so it seems inexplicable that on returning to Coventry (Christ know why) after my degree I decided to have another go at ... football. Quite how I thought this would end I have no idea, and if I was hoping that the twelve-year gap between leaving junior school and starting work had suddenly imbued me with some kind of footballing ability, then I was in for a rude awakening.

What happened was that I was approached by a bloke in a pub I used to drink in called the Windmill and asked if I wanted to turn out for the pub side. His name was Steve Brassington and he was trying to put a team together, having decamped there from another nearby pub called the Sportsman’s Arms (pound a pint and a stripper on a Sunday). Having been given £100 by the landlord to buy some new kit with the pub’s name on it, we promptly pissed this windfall up the wall on a night out and then turned out for our first game of the season in the old Sportsman’s kit with the name taped over. At our first training session, Brasso quickly realised the awful mistake he’d made in asking me to join the team, and I was moved from striker, to midfield general, to centre half, to right back, to substitute in the space of about five minutes flat. Pace, flair, skill and vision were just some of the traits completely absent from the team, but even in this company I stood out as a fat, lumbering oaf of no discernible use unless there was a chronic shortage of people with a pulse to turn out. Despite all this I quite enjoyed being part of the team while it lasted, chiefly because of some of the characters featured, including:

Tom Sefton – an alcoholic goalkeeper who used to turn up Sunday mornings shaking with the DTs and who’d say things like ‘Don’t let ’em get any crosses in lads, I’ve got a bastard of a headache.’

Will Johnson – a ponderous striker known as ‘Shovel Foot’ for being the scourge of side-netting or ‘Jigsaw’ because he frequently went to pieces in the box.

Simon Dale – known as ‘Black Bess’ because he galloped fruitlessly up and down the wing in search of the ball, or ‘Gunshot’ because of his habit of shooting at goal whenever he got the ball, no matter where he was on the pitch.

Chris Morris – Moggy was actually a good player and a lovely guy unless riled, at which point he’d turn into a combination of Vinnie Jones and Reinhard Heydrich until he’d upended someone, whereupon he’d return to being Penry the mild-mannered janitor.

~~Steve Ward~~ — ~~Wardrobe~~ was a somewhat static defender, also known as ‘~~Douglas Bader~~’ for being good in the air but crap on the ground.

Greg Evans – a classy midfielder who later ended up in the clink for donning a raincoat, cap and glasses and collecting his dad’s pension for two years after he died.

We played in the heady heights of the Bedworth and North Coventry Sunday Alliance Division One and in 1992 actually managed to go through a whole season unbeaten. I made a number of substitute appearances (the number in question being four) totalling about 25 minutes of actual play in which I managed to touch the ball a couple of times but, more importantly, I managed not to cock anything up either, which was my main goal. Sadly, after securing promotion to the Premier Division, the team fizzled out and was reincarnated as a five-a-side outfit, a game even more fast-paced and ball-tampered than ordinary football, in which my need to still keep looking at my feet to control them was horribly exposed on the one occasion I tried it.

And that’s about it by way of sporting background and context-setting, so if you’ve picked up this book in search of the inspirational story of someone who overcame the odds to succeed, then you’re in for a disappointing read (and you may be in for one even if you aren’t looking for that). I have neither overcome odds, nor particularly succeeded. I have not challenged a disability, beaten the bullies, battled through setbacks, defeated schizophrenia by defying the voices in my head (either of them), picked up the pieces of my shattered dreams and rebuilt them into a towering monolith of success. People do not throw rose petals at me as I walk down the street nor do I drink champagne from my golden slipper, which is probably just as well as I don’t want to die of greenfly or damp feet. I was just a nice, inoffensive kid who happened to be shit at sports. Except one ...

Chapter 3

It is 4.45 a.m. and the bedside alarm has just gone off, producing much the same effect as if I had been blasted in the coccyx with a taser. I spend the next five minutes lying in bed in a state of advanced death until the alarm goes off again, prompting me to sit up slowly, like a zombie rising from the grave, only even more furious and incoherent.

What follows looks like a mime artist attempting to portray the world's most incompetent burglar as I stumble around the bedroom in the dark trying to put on socks, pants and shirt, all while also trying to stay completely silent for fear of waking my wife, Nicky. She will not be pleased if she is disturbed and can be really grumpy if she doesn't get enough sleep. I once did a radio interview in which the DJ asked how I managed to get up so early in the morning to go training, to which I joked 'If you'd seen my wife first thing in the morning you'd want to get out of bed as well,' which got a laugh but boy did I get in trouble for that one.

I sneak downstairs like a dog up to no good and slink past my dog, Patch, who really has been up to no good and who is now watching me beadily through one open eye as I try to make myself a drink and a bowl of cereal. Normally I am pretty bad at staying silent in the kitchen and this morning is no exception, although not as bad as a few nights ago when I returned home 'refreshed' from the pub and set about making myself an amazingly large fry-up at 2.00 a.m. using every single pan in the kitchen. Then I pad quietly outside to my campervan, trying not to wake the neighbours, and start the engine. Actually, bollocks to the neighbours ... they never care whether I'm asleep or not, so I rev the engine and screech off up the road, as impressively as one can in a Mazda Bongo.

The reason for all this creeping around is that I am off swimming with my local swimming club or Masters Swimming Club to be precise as the adults team is known, to differentiate us from the juniors and seniors. They have separate training times away from the grown-ups lest they should have to share a changing room with us and end up running screaming from the pool at the sight of several saggy scrotums resembling the last turkeys in the butcher's shop window.

The swims take place in Coventry's main sports centre, or 'Coventry Baths' as it is better known, which happens to be one of the few 50-metre pools in Britain despite the Council's persistent attempts to turn it into some kind of tiresome splash pool. There are seven swimming sessions on offer for members of the City of Coventry Swimming Club each week, two of which take place from 5.30–7.00 a.m., which is why I'm up with the lark and wrestling the turkey into my budgie-smugglers. The reason for starting so early is because the pool is not open to the great unwashed public until 7.00 a.m., so this way we get to have some quality training time without having to dodge round some oaf-gimmer who blocks the lane by hanging in the water like a bloody jellyfish. The session is presided over by Allison Stoney, former international swimmer, multiple medal winner and highly respected ASA coach, who possesses the most important qualification any swim coach can have – that of having a voice like an estuary foghorn that can be heard even when your head is under water. This morning's session involved a warm-up of 8 x 150m freestyle (yes, that's a *warm-up* of 1200m!), followed by a prep set of 1,000m worth of drills, before the main set of 2,000m worth of 100m and 50m sprints punctuated by recovery swims of backstroke and fly. By the time we are done I feel as though someone has spent the past ninety minutes hitting my upper arms with a frying pan, and I have clenched my jaw so hard to achieve Allison's target times that the enamel may have dropped off my teeth. Allison is a hardened swim coach of the old school who operates a competitive Masters team.

but she doesn't mind a few triathletes joining in with the sessions provided we also turn out for the club in relay teams in big national galas. Sharing the lane with me this morning is fellow triathlete Keith Burdett, a silver-haired freestyle powerhouse who looks like a bleached Wookiee. This session is not unusually hard by Allison's standards. No matter what she throws at us we keep turning up like we've all got Stockholm Syndrome.

I mentioned that I was shit at all sports except one, and that one is swimming. I was actually a reasonably good swimmer as a kid and swam for City of Coventry as a junior and teenager until girls were going out, girls, drinking and girls began to occupy my time. As ever with me, it wasn't a straightforward story; as a toddler I apparently hated the water, screaming the pool down as my dad towed me round in a rubber ring making chugging noises – although this may of course have been because he was wearing some multicoloured knickerbocker trunks. At the age of seven, though, I broke my leg after dicking about on a hillside with some other kids and once I'd left hospital after eight weeks in traction, the doctors told my parents that swimming was the best way to get me up to strength, so I was packed off to Livingstone Road Baths to kick my way up and down the pool. The first time I took to swimming like a duck to hoisin sauce and soon I was in the team in galas, enduring the horrible moment of total silence you get just before a race starts while you're standing on the blocks, bricking yourself.

Now forgive me if I digress for a moment but this is MY book. Okay, you've paid for it so technically it's yours, but this is my only chance to get something off my chest that has been on the tip of my tongue for almost 40 years. My leg-breaking incident took place at my junior school during playtime and was caused by me falling awkwardly after being pushed down a hill. The fall not only broke my leg but also knocked me unconscious and when I came to I was being dragged – yes, *dragged* – by the shoulders by two older kids into the assembly hall under the supervision of one of the teachers. Once in there I was laid flat on my back on one of those long wooden benches whereupon the teacher, not accompanied by another teacher and presumably fellow member of the Hitler Youth, tried to *straighten my leg out*. Needless to say I screamed the place down, leading them to declare my leg was broken. I was then carried to the entrance hall, sat in a chair with my bent leg propped on a table while they phoned not an ambulance, but my mum to come and pick me up. Mum was left to carry me to her car alone, lie me on the back seat and drive me to Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital where a passing stranger helped her carry me into A&E where I spent the next eight weeks. I don't remember seeing either of these teachers again after this, presumably because my dad went up to the school and killed them with one of his golf clubs.

Anyway, violent recriminations aside, I carried on swimming with a modicum of success until my mid-teens, but drifted away from the sport until my mid-thirties when taking up triathlons made me start the old early-morning torture again. Unusually for a triathlete, swimming is my favourite part of the race. All the coolest animals in the world swim. Sharks swim, as do dolphins, whales, otters, seals, penguins, clownfish, manta-rays, seahorses, manatees, duck-billed platypuses, Sharron Davie, a dreadful spindly killer-fish and, of course, Ironmen in training. Let's be honest, swimming is what makes triathletes special, because it scares the crap out of ordinary people. If I had a pound for every non-triathlete who told me they could 'do the bike and run but couldn't manage 40m never mind 400m' well I'd have about a tenner, but you get the picture. For most people a few lengths of semi-drownings in their local pool is enough without adding the concepts of open water, wetsuits and getting booted in the face. Consequently, if you want to stand tall among mere mortals as a fearless giant with a granite jaw that could deflect kettles being hurled at your head, it's the swim that will do it for you.

Even among experienced triathletes, the swim is often something to be endured rather than

enjoyed and for newbies it's the part of triathlon that has them sweating more than Peter Andre on *University Challenge*. Neither Mark nor Joe, my fellow Challenge Roth-men, are relishing the swim while for me it's going to be easily the best bit of the whole race. Having spent a lot of time paddling about, I have acquired the following tips about triathlon-swimming, which I now pass on to you at an extra charge.

Tip 1 – Choose your swim cap carefully

Just as triathletes spend ages selecting the right race T-shirt to wear to intimidate others with evidence of their athletic brilliance, the same goes for swim hats. A cap with a race name on it trumps a plain one, and any cap with Ironman on it trumps that. The only thing that trumps an Ironman cap is a swimming club hat, because it marks you out as someone who enjoys this kind of thing. The only exception to all this is bald men who can swim bareheaded. It's one of the few occasions where being a baldy is an advantage – no cap to worry about, no towel, no shampoo, just a quick half-hour cry in front of the mirror and you're ready.

Tip 2 – Join a club

Rebecca Adlington did not become a champion by having to battle past a fat bloke doing widths and neither will you. With lakes and seaside out of bounds for six months of the year, a swimming pool is the best place to get the metres in, which inevitably means mixing it with the public doing breaststroke in the fast lane. Take it from me, no matter how many times you splash or 'accidentally' kick them, they never get the message. So you're much better off joining your local club where you can acquire that lovely permanent chlorine smell after hours of untroubled pull-buoy reps.

Tip 3 – Learn to fly or tumble

If you must share your training time with the public, creating a bit of room for yourself is vital. Nothing says 'Piss off out of my way' more than doing butterfly or tumble turns. Neither will help you in a triathlon, but they are an important skill for keeping the head-out-of-the-water from the don't-get-my-hair-wet brigade at bay.

Tip 4 – Avoid cold-water weirdos

When you start training in lakes and seas, you will notice some people stand out from the rubber-clad crowd by wearing nothing but a costume that gives all the cold-protection of a Borat-style parka. These are open-water swimmers who are training for some ridiculous venture like swimming to Denmark, and no matter how freezing the water, these people always claim to feel warm, in the way that people are when they carry a bit too much weight. Have nothing to do with these dangerous lunatics, because I know to my cost they will talk you into some kind of salt-water torture. This has happened to me, as we shall see in a moment when I was talked into joining the English Channel swim, and which was the worst idea I've had since I tried to convince some girls that I could speak Japanese by shoving some really hot chips in my mouth.

Tip 5 – Make your decision about the Piranha Pack

The piranha pack is that collection of triathletes who start on the front row of the race, charge into the water at full tilt and spend the next 750m/1500m/3.8k cheerfully beating each other up. These are not places for the faint-hearted and even as an experienced swimmer I once got duffed up so much that when I went for a medical examination the doctor started doing a post-mortem

However, the pack always takes the shortest line so you have to decide whether to join the punch
~~fun for the quickest route, or stay well out of it and take a longer way round.~~

These tips won't give you superhero powers, but they may help you survive in the water a little bit more easily, and we don't need any superheroes anyway, there are already enough people out on the streets of Britain fighting each other in their pants. There's no doubt that all my pool training has helped my triathlon swimming enormously although, on the downside, it has led me to start taking part in a number of Masters swimming galas. For the unknowing among you, Masters swimming tournaments are open to 24-year-olds and over – and in many cases quite a long way over. In fact some of the competitors don't look like they're pushing forty, they look like they're dragging it. They are run along exactly the same lines as all those swimming tournaments you see on the telly, although sadly without the opportunity to talk to Sharron Davies at the end while wearing nothing but a pair of Speedos. Distances vary from 50m sprints up to 1500m death-battles, and you can choose between the different strokes of front crawl, breast-struggle, back-struggle and butter-flop. A typical advert for a Masters swim gala could easily read: 'Hey you! Are you old enough to pay income tax and go to bed at a time of your own choosing? When you swim, can you dive in without knocking yourself unconscious and do a tumble-turn without half the pool going up your nose? Do you fancy the idea of walking around with more gold round your neck than Mr T? Then it's Masters swimming for you!'

Because I'm over 40 and farcically competitive, Allison talked (shouted) me into trying my luck in a tournament some time ago and, to my astonishment, I won a medal. Admittedly, it was a bronze medal in a race where there were only three swimmers in the M40 category, but if someone wants to give me a medal for basically not being dead, I'm up for it. When I first started out I had the typical triathlete's view of swimming – no dives or tumble turns because you never do them in races, and every pool swim is merely a training opportunity so doing anything other than freestyle for anything less than 400m is pointless heresy. However, over time I realised that it's the other strokes where the medals are to be found, precisely because no other bugger does them. At my most recent Masters tournament I won SEVEN medals – three golds, two silvers and three bronzes – and only one was for freestyle. I even won one for individual medley, a vicious invention that sees you do all four strokes once before spending the next ten minutes trying to get your heart rate back under 200. Now I don't mean to denigrate the athletic abilities of Masters swimmers, who frequently have bodies shaped like Dairylea triangles and can post times for 100m that I'd be hard pushed to match on a bike, it's just that there aren't many of them. The numbers get even fewer if you are female or over 40 – in fact come the day I'm a 73-year-old woman I'll be quids in. It's also worth noting that, although I've made it sound easy, there are lots of ways to get disqualified at swimming. You can choose from false starts, screw-kick, not touching the wall with both hands, not turning properly, not handing your racecard in and farting on the starting blocks – although that might just have been me. From the moment you step on to the blocks at the start you are alone and horribly exposed, and there are no opportunities for the usual triathlon open-water-mass-start skulduggery because the water is crystal clear and proceedings are watched over by more referees than – I don't know, I ran out of metaphors after the Mr T gala from now on you're on your own.

As well as the obvious benefits of getting faster at swimming and winning a chest full of non-ferrous metals, there are lots of other plus-sides to Masters tournaments, not least that hanging round swimming pools all day is fantastic for your core strength because you spend hours holding your stomach in. The only downside to Masters events that I can think of is that they are uncomfortably like being back at school doing swimming galas, and in the changing room it's hard for me to repre

the urge to flick my teammates' backsides with a wet towel or swing the metal clothes basket against the floor so it kicks up sparks. Actually no, there is another downside, which is that you are surrounded by swimmers, who have an uncomfortable habit of wanting to do lots of swimming. And it's for this reason I got talked into swimming the Channel...

It was all the fault of the fourth member of our Roth party, Muhammad McMEnamin, who, on a stormy night while we were both pissed, said, 'We should have a go at the Channel' to which I, of course, replied, 'Yes.' Because I'm a twat. I thought no more of it and dismissed it as the usual inebriated nonsense triathletes come out with when they have sniffed the barmaid's apron, but little did I know that Steve, who is also a Masters swimmer, was serious. Before I knew it, he'd booked the pilot boats, registered us with the Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation, organised medical tests, ordered a vat of goose fat and sent me a white feather.

Swimming the Channel is the ultimate challenge in open water swimming, a pastime that has more than enough challenges associated with it. Ironmans all involve open water swimming in the sea, lakes and canals, with temperatures ranging from Baltic to Arctic. In fact, I think I'm beginning to suffer from a rare new medical condition – 'Open Water Tourettes.' The symptoms appear to be the sudden and violent urge to say the f-word repeatedly, whenever I dive into a lake for a training swim. This is usually to do with the coldness of the water and there's no denying I suffered a particularly bad case of OWT at the start of this season, when the British summer finally arrived with a 10-degree drop in temperature and two solid days of rain. Despite the confident declaration of the swim-marshals at the lake I was training in that the water temperature was '14 and rising', on diving into the lake I suddenly exploded into a barrage of swear words that made Gordon Ramsay sound like Noddy. This was particularly unfortunate because there was a group of Cub Scouts watching and I don't think Ake was very pleased that his troop witnessed a blue-faced man shooting out of the water like a Polar missile while shouting 'faaaaarrrrrkkkkk' at the top of his voice. It's also worth mentioning that when I say 'dived into the lake', I'm stretching the definition of the word 'dive' a bit. The reality is that, like most of the Saturday swimmers at my local lake, I pick my way into the water like a clown crossing a minefield, before standing waist deep in the water for five minutes trying to summon up the courage to pitch forward into the icy wastes. I usually try to do this while staring off into the middle distance with hands on hips and jaw sticking out, trying to look tough and gritty just in case any girls from the Playboy mansion should happen to be passing.

Our training for the Channel swim mostly took place in Brighton where Steve lives and where there were indeed plenty of girls passing, normally on their way back from a hen night just as we were picking our way across the stones to the water's edge at 6.00 a.m. wearing nothing but Speedos and a look of terror. Conditions for swimming at Brighton are best described as 'borderline' (i.e. borderline psychopathic) with 7ft waves, driving rain and a howling wind all combining to make it about as pleasant as type 2 diabetes. Having been thrown about like a piece of flailing human jetsam for an hour the real fun came though when I tried to get out, with two waves smacking me so hard they ripped my goggles off and threw me headfirst into a kind of pebbly washing machine before I was spat out on to the beach. To complete our pleasure a large female lifeguard with everything a man could want (muscles and a moustache) was waiting for us with three key questions:

1. Did we see the red flags that forbade swimming that day?
2. Why didn't we tell them we were going to be swimming?

3. Did we know that we were 'causing distress to the public' who had seen us lolloping around in the water and assumed we were drunks who had fallen off the pier?

To which the answers obviously were:

1. Yes, but we pretended we hadn't.
2. Because you were still in bed when we plunged in at 6.00 a.m.
3. If you think that's bad wait 'til I take my trunks off.

So far you'll note that I've successfully implied to you that we were going to be swimming the English Channel solo, whereas I've actually been bending the truth so far it's virtually a balloon animal. I was just one cog in a well-oiled machine of a team called 'The League Mentalmen', which was making a relay attempt to get to France without spending any money on ferries. And what a team it was! There was Steve 'Ice Man' Howes, Robin Corder and a bloke I hadn't met yet called Andy Heath, who I was counting on to be a relative of Michael Phelps. The Ice Man was so named because I've got more frost in my fingernails than he has in his whole body and he had been finding the sea temperature a bit on the nippy side. Lastly there was me, with my legs the size of a bookie's biro. How could we possibly fail?

But what of Steve Mac? Well, he had assembled a rival team that was taking the whole business far more seriously than us and was made up of biriyani-boy himself, Karen Throsby and Jamie Goodhead. As a Brighton resident, Steve was experienced in sea-swimming, making regular attempts to kill himself by swimming under Brighton Pier. Karen was doing the relay version first as a warm-up for having a go at a solo crossing, while Australian Jamie, having lived in the UK for too long, was trying to make a swim for it. All in all, they didn't stand a chance against us. Earlier on I cautioned you against getting involved with these open water swimming types, and here's why ... Imagine it's 2.45 a.m., pitch dark, and you're on a small boat in the middle of the English Channel. You're standing on the back of the boat holding on to a ladder with your feet in the water, waiting for a klaxon to signal the moment at which you will jump into the sea. The water temperature is 16 degrees and you are wearing nothing but a pair of Speedos. Should you ever find yourself in this position, I can absolutely guarantee what you will be thinking, and it will be: 'WHAT AM I DOING?!' This is certainly what went through my mind as I clung to the back of the good ship *Sea Satin*, waiting to take my turn on our relay swim.

Our team of four had been going for two hours, starting from Dover just after midnight. Big Andy did the first hour, Robin was just completing the second hour and I was the next in to bat. Both Andy and Robin swam well and looked comfortable, heaping pressure on me not to be crap. Inevitably the klaxon of death went and I jumped in. I was expecting it to be cold and we'd been told the water was cool but manageable 16 degrees. The water I jumped into felt more like 1.6 degrees. It was so cold I couldn't swear. Or swim. Or breathe. I just made this gasping noise and started windmilling frantically to get round to the side of the boat where the spotlight was. I don't know if you have ever swum in the sea, in the dark, but take it from me, it isn't for the nervous-natured. I'm not usually afraid of the dark, but then I don't usually encounter quite so much of it. It was above me, ahead of me, behind me and, most importantly, underneath me. I am not afraid to say that I was absolutely cacking myself and I stuck to the spotlight beam like a moth. So began possibly the least pleasant hour of my life, which involved a freezing, pitch-black swim through the saltiest, most seaweed-blanketed

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