

## **The Consolation of Solitary Sports**

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### **Introduction**

It is somewhere between midnight and 1. It is three hours since I watched the last streaks of daylight disappear and it will be three hours more before I see them again. I have just a bubble of light a few feet wide in which every moth on the Ridgeway has come to join me. On the horizon maybe I make out the glow of a floodlight and the hum of a generator marking one of the tiny occasional outposts that provide warm tea, cold, flat coke, and a miniature cornucopia of sugary salty goodness before I disappear back into the night.

I have been running for around 16 hours. I will be running for several more. When the hedgerows clear and the perspective is right I may see the occasional torch in the distance. More often, on the soft summer breeze I hear a rustle. Not so long ago water drenched desperate burning bodies and buffs and bags were deployed as futile shields, but after dark in July the temperature falls away like a cliff and those who ditched all but vests by day struggle, as running turns to a slow walk, to retain any warmth they can with foil blankets that provide the only reminder that hundreds of shredded bodies stretch over tens of miles.

Every time my feet hit the ground, pain shoots across the sole and up the side of my calf. At least one toenail is loose, and much of the skin is rubbed raw. I am so utterly exhausted my mind has stopped wandering anywhere but the footfall in front of me and the struggle on the rutted rounded path to stay upright, not from fear of injury but because the effort of hauling myself up from one more fall is more effort than my muscles can bear.

It is at this moment I begin to sob. Loudly and uncontrollably. Not from the pain; not from the despair; but because for one of the only times in years I realise I am, in this moment, truly and absolutely happy.

### **Context**

Exercise and mental health are regular bedfellows in our conversations. But if we treat their relationship too glibly, we can end in some uncomfortable places. So it is important to begin by explaining very briefly what I am not going to say.

The most obvious preface is to point out the obvious. I may have bipolar disorder, but in other ways I am very lucky. Despite appearances, my physical health is extremely robust. I can throw things at my body and my body will take it. Many people cannot. And while, yes, there are many ways of incorporating cardiovascular exercise into one's life, many people are not as fortunate as I am. For that, as well as the fact that it's never a good thing to do, shaming those who cannot exercise, or those who can but for whom many of the activities I will talk about today are out of reach, is not acceptable.

That is why I will not be saying, today or at any other time I should hope, "You can do anything you put your mind to." You can't. The implication behind the statement is not inspirational but shaming and mean spirited. I would much rather say that what sports like ultramarathonning in particular can teach you is that that you can often do things you never thought you could. And that will do me fine.

Second, exercise is great. The great outdoors is super fabulous great. But many of you may have seen this meme online [picture of forest with caption “this is an antidepressant” and of pills with caption “this is shit”]

And that is neither super nor fabulous nor great. Which is why, thankfully, there are also many more balanced counters. [picture of forest with caption “this is a forest (useful if you are having a bad day)”, and pills with caption “This is medicine (useful if you have an illness)”]

I will not be shaming anyone who cannot exercise. Nor will I be shaming anyone who needs to take medication.

### **Bad at Games**

At school I was bad at games. I wasn't just bad at games, I hated sport. As far back as I can remember, sport and mental health went together for me. But in those early days the relationship was negative on every level.

I was always different. I was terrified of the other kids at school. They were like alien beings. I had no idea how they functioned, just that their purpose in life seemed to be to make my life hell. And the more different I was, a difference increasingly built on anxiety, depression, ritualistic tics, and outrageous behaviours that seem, looking back, to be the early markers of what would later become manic episodes, the worse it got.

PE and games increasingly became opportunities for other children in my year to use physical activity as a mask for deliberate acts of violence. Teachers' eyes couldn't be everywhere. Though sometimes, because in this world I didn't understand sport seemed to matter – desperately – often it was less a case of bullying slipping under the radar and more a case of games teachers steeped in some kind of Darwinian machismo seeing a rewarding humour in this relentless pursuit.

Because I was so miserable, I never paid any attention to the actual sport. Combine that with an increasing tendency towards comfort eating in an effort to find some, any kind of relief, and my performance suffered more, I was even more the cause of embarrassment for the teams who got lumbered with me, even more an object of humiliation.

But even through this, there was something I could not quite let go of about running around outside. More specifically, running around in deserted outside places on my own. At weekends my parents would take me to the Forest of Dean and I would dart into the trees and lose myself for hours. In the summers I would wander out of town to the scrub of semi fields and the dilapidated concrete and brickwork of bridges and warehouses and drainage systems, and create worlds in which I could lose myself completely.

There was something about being outside, moving, far away from people, that felt, more than anything, like home. But as my mental health worsened, that world was lost.

When I came to Oxford, I managed assiduously to avoid all forms of exercise. It was more than a decade after leaving school that I found myself, starting my DPhil, living in Linacre where one night I stumbled, by accident, into the basement where I discovered a 24 hour gym. I sat down, in my jeans and shirt, on the indoor rowing machine and started pulling.

The response was almost instantaneous. Although bouts of ill health meant that my progress stopped and started for the next decade and more, I knew straightaway I had found something almost magical, even if at that stage I had no idea what the magic was.

Fast forward again to 2013, and although a series of episodes of severe mental ill health had left me 19 stone and inactive, the connection I had made on the erg that night had never gone away. When I went for my 40 plus check up at the GP to discover that – I told you I was lucky – my heart, my cholesterol, and my blood sugar were all right in the middle of the healthy range, that was all I needed. I asked my GP if there were limits to what could do. No, she said. I asked if she was sure. Yes, she was sure. Even if I exercise really hard, I asked. Yes, even if I exercised really hard.

9 months later, I rowed 108 kilometres on the indoor rower at the University Club, and a year after that I completed my first 100 kilometre ultramarathon run.

What running, and indoor rowing before that, has done is bypassed the horrors of the sportsfield, the association of exercise with teams of which I could never be a part, with a world that is strange and frightening. It has reconnected me instead to the young child inventing his own world in forests made of wood and concrete.

### **Flow**

Not only has running reconnected me with a world in which I can feel at home and so a refuge from the world in which I live the rest of the time which is confusing, exhausting, and full of people who, however well-intentioned, will never quite understand.

There is something – or rather there are two things – about the actual physical act of running that are transformative in very similar but very different ways.

When you strip it down to its basics, running is one of the simplest things you can do. You might adjust a little on the hills, but essentially every step you take is like every other. At first, it won't feel like that. For the first month, every time I ran my feet screamed, my legs begged no and my chest half collapsed under the weight of its own wheezing. And when I say "ran" I mean about 100 metres of very slow foot dragging. Every step felt very different from the one that had preceded it – in the sense that the pain had ramped itself up another level of magnitude. But after a couple of months something happened. I started not to notice time passing. I would look around and realise I was somewhere completely different from where I had been the last time I looked. What was happening was almost like alchemy. That simple, unconscious action of putting one foot in front of the other was taking care of all the physical irritations and distractions and anxiety inducements of life, and my mind, no longer playing games of dare with itself, was free to wander.

And there are also times where the opposite is true. In running this can come on a steep rocky trail, a particularly muddy path, or just when your legs hurt so much you can barely bring yourself to let your foot touch the ground. And it's there all the time in a sport like parkour, when you are learning to jump, fall, grip and hang in ways you would have thought impossible. These are the times when what you are doing requires your attention to such an extent that it is literally impossible to think about anything else.

The need for no concentration at all, and the need for total concentration have the same effect, that of losing yourself completely in flow.

### **And some other perspectives on sport and mental health**

The running world, in particular the world of extreme endurance, furnishes us with stories similar to mine at every level, right to the very top of the sport.

I guess it should come as no surprise that a sport where events often take in excess of 24 hours without a break with training schedules to match should contain a number of former substance addicts in its top ranks. Timothy Olsen, like so many, began drinking and taking drugs to self-medicate his depression. And like so many he woke up one day, an addict, realising they had made his mental health so much worse. When one of his friends and fellow users committed suicide, Olsen joined a running group in an effort to get clean. A handful of years later, before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, he won the world's most prestigious ultramarathon, the Western States, a 100 mile race that includes more than 5 kilometres of elevation gain, in a mind boggling record time of 14 hours and 46 minutes.

Last summer, a number of athletes took part in The Icebreaker Run, taking them right across America on foot, running under the simple and familiar banner "Beat the Stigma." The most vocal of the group was ultra running legend Catra Corbett, who chucks up a 50 or 100 mile race most weekends and is most widely known in ultra running circles, and increasingly outside of them, for running everywhere with her pet rescue dachshund Tru-Man.

Corbett, who at 51 has now been sober for 21 years, has found, like Olsen, the long intense periods of solitary endeavour have been key to the battle with substance addiction.

It is not just addiction that is found among endurance runners. One of the world's most celebrated athletes, New Zealand's Anna Frost, is open about her battles with depression, and has become an ambassador for mental health and the promotion of positive role models for women through the wonderful global initiative Sisu Girls.

And of course, just last year, the BBC Sports Personality of the Year's Helen Rollason Award for outstanding achievement went to Ben Smith, whose mental health had suffered after homophobic bullying at school, who ran 401 marathons in 401 days to support Kidscape and Stonewall.

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#### Verity Westgate on open water swimming

I took up Openwater swimming in 2009 when I entered a one mile swim in the lake district to raise money for charity. I had been a twice a week, forty lengths head up breaststroke swimmer, since leaving university, so swimming itself was not alien to me, but I had never swum out of doors before. Taking part in this event proved quite a defining moment for the things I would do in the next 8 years and in adding a really key tool for managing my recurrent depression. There has been a huge rise in the number of people doing openwater swimming in the UK over the last few years and the benefits to mental health are often cited.

I'd like to start by reading a few lines from a book called Waterlog by Roger Deakin which describes a journey of swimming around the British Isles

"When you swim, you feel your body for what it mostly is – water – and it begins to move with the water around it....when you enter the water, something like metamorphosis happens. Leaving behind the land, you go through the looking-glass surface and enter a new world...you see and experience things when you are swimming in a way that is completely different from any other...Natural water has always held the magical power to cure. Somehow or other it transmits its own self-regenerating powers to the swimmer".

#### **Why swimming for me?**

Swimming is different from running in that there is more sensory deprivation; you can't really see very far around you if your head is out, if your head is in the water, you might not be able to see more than a few cms away. But at the same time, the senses that you have are more intense. You feel the temperature of the water

Like running, the repetitive action of swimming is very soothing. You get into a rhythm, repeating your strokes over and over again. And as you focus on this, and the feeling and sound of the water, eventually, you can start to still your mind. I get into the water and my mind is busy; as I swim, my brain starts to solve problems lurking in my subconscious; if I keep going long enough, my mind no longer starts to wander but achieves a stillness where all that matters is the feeling of the water and the sound it makes as I move through it.

Over the years, I have completed a number of increasingly long "marathon" swims, culminating in a two-way Windermere swim in 2015 where I swam down the lake and then back up again for a total of 21 miles. So besides the beneficial nature of swimming itself, I find having a goal and a sense of purpose very helpful for my mental health. It anchors swimming as an important part of my daily routine providing a small sense of achievement even when my mood is low.

### **Where to go?**

My favourite location has to be the Lake District as there are so many watery spaces with different characters and amazing scenery. Many areas are remarkably unspoilt and you can get a whole lake to yourself if you are lucky!

Around Oxford, most obvious location is the Thames. The Open Water Swimming Society have a Wild Swim map which will give you some ideas of where to head, and not just in Oxford, but all around the country. The Outdoor Swimming Society website also has information about how to swim outside safely.

Swimming in the sea is a totally different sensory experience, but there is something rather lovely about being buffeted by waves whilst you are swimming.

And if you don't feel brave enough to take on a wild swim, simply swimming in an outdoor pool feels quite different to swimming indoors, almost like a mini holiday where you are surrounded by fresh air. Hinksey Outdoor Pool, down the Abingdon Road, and open during the summer months, is a lovely place to go, especially on an overcast day when it is not too busy!

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### **Being outside as a way to be an outsider**

I want to use the last part of this talk, as the slides take you on a tour of some of Oxford's wonderful spaces, by going beyond the "get out and be inspired" clichés into which it would be so easy to fall.

I want to put forward two very simple propositions that on the one hand offer reasons why this kind of physical activity seems to have such a profound effect on mental health and on the other furnish us with reasons to explore extreme sports that take away the whiff of the boot camp that can be so debilitating:

- Being outside gives us a way of being an outsider

- Extreme sports are less about exercise or fitness and more about finding a unique vantage point from which to view the world in which we find ourselves

Many of us who have experienced periods of mental ill health will also have experienced, connected in one way or another to that ill health, life as outsiders, feeling we don't belong, ostracised by stigma or anxiety or expectation or simply the refusal of our neurology to cooperate with what society demands of it, convinced, as the title of Milan Kundera's work puts it so poetically, that Life is Elsewhere.

The world we find ourselves in is changing, and in many respects, for those of us with the often complex needs that accompany mental ill health, those changes are for the better. But the changes we need in order to function in the world in ways many of our colleagues would recognise as "normal" remain in many respects distant prospects.

And so we find ourselves constantly reminded that we are outsiders. In places like this, especially, our otherness can feel as though it is always in the foreground. Casual conversation with colleagues who seem, intuitively, to know what to say, the expectation that a cheery demeanour is part of our job description, the well meaning yet gaslighting reassurances from colleagues that in 7<sup>th</sup> week "we get tired too". All of these and so many more require us constantly to use energy we do not have to conform ourselves to a world that will not use the energy it does have to accommodate us.

What I have found in endurance running is a place where I do not have to try and be on the inside. I've also learned something I never expected about the impact decades of mental ill health has had on me. As always, this is my experience, it may not be yours, but I have encountered it elsewhere in the ultra community. It's there in a certain look when a mountain looms and the legs are shot and there is as far yet to run as you have already been. It was the look on my wife's face when she tore her thigh muscle after 40 kilometres of a 100 kilometre race, got the medics to tape her up, and completed the last 60 kilometres despite being barely able to walk.

It's a look that turns conventional running wisdom on its head. The key to running long distances, group after group, column after column, will tell you, is to train your mind to believe. Your body can go the distance if only your mind doesn't win with its constant cries to stop. For some of us at least who have spent decades using every weapon in our mental army just to resist the desire not to be alive, or to stay clean and sober, that resilience is already there, and it makes us uniquely suited to feats of extreme endurance. Making yourself keep going for 20, 30, 50 kilometres more when your body screams no – compared to facing the world on your darkest days, that's nothing. The problem comes with the finishing line, with the inevitable return to a world in which your mind once again begs you no.

The beauty of solitary sport is that there are no rules or pressures or expectations or demands upon you – even the demand to be competent! There is only the world you create according to your own needs and desires. Where a neurotypical world might see loneliness, for many of us there is a beautiful liberation, a freedom from the need to try and construct a version of yourself for social consumption. You can just be an outsider. The trails don't care.

### **Flexibility and fun**

The joy of solitary sport is that you can make it what you want. Many people who take up exercise say the value of being in a group is that they feel an accountability. Their peers are the reason they still go out on the days they really don't feel like it but know that they should. Whatever "should"

means. Anyone who has anxiety in any form, let alone social or communication issues, might, of course, experience that in a slightly different way. For many of us the cocktail of guilt and fear, or simply having to handle coping with the complexity of being with people, far from being the thing that gets us out of the door can be the thing that keeps us inside.

Shedding that whole layer of expectation and pressure can be remarkably liberating. Why the assumption we need that kind of motivation? Those of us with mental health issues spend enough of our lives trying to educate people out of the myth that we are fundamentally lazy left to our own devices will settle into an equilibrium of inactivity through some kind of volition. We need to make sure we're not buying into those myths ourselves.

And that brings me to my final point, which is that we are familiar with the sticks used to beat us – by the media, family, shops, workplaces. We need to quit using shaming to get us to do something as wonderful as exercise. Forget “I ought to lose weight” or “I need to be fit” or “I have to counter the side effects of my meds.”

The simple thing of it is that these sports are amazing because they give you an entirely new perspective on the environment you inhabit every day.

Literally a new perspective. Whether you are following the practice of parkour to look up and around to find new paths and discovering the joys of Oxford's roofline, exploring snickleways and paths, seeing the city from the waterline, or simply experiencing its passing at a different speed, solitary sports transport you to a myriad parallel worlds that you don't have to go anywhere to be able to explore.

So, let's close with a kaleidoscope of just a few of those worlds thanks to the wonderful people at Oxford Parkour.