

IM TALK – ‘Why I tri’ 2019

In 2011 at the age of 35 I started training for triathlon after signing up for Ironman Lanzarote the following year. I had been persuaded by a friend to do something different with him after having played top level club hockey for 20 years. There no was no specific reason for choosing triathlon other than the fact I could swim and had ridden a mountain bike for fun in the summer, so I thought, ‘why not’, after all it seemed a lot more interesting than training for a marathon. Ironman Lanzarote turned out to be my first ever triathlon and after a fairly dedicated 12 months of semi-structured training of up to 20 hours a week I managed to limp over the line in a respectable time a little over 11 hours. Despite the understandable physical and psychological challenge I enjoyed this experience more than I had ever expected and this was going to turn out to be the day my life changed forever. I decided to peruse triathlon as my sport of choice and that same year qualified to for the 70.3 Worlds in Vegas. I then went on to qualify for and race Kona 2015. Since then I have qualified for Kona twice more, finished on the podium in my age group at (I think) fourteen 70.3s (about half of which were wins) and achieved my racing outcome highlight to date at Dubai 70.3 this year finishing 3rd age grouper overall. These personal outcome accomplishments have been beyond anything I could have ever imagined. However, this is not really what triathlon means. This is not why I love it and is not why I do it, although it took me some time to understand this. I am just extremely privileged to have some physical and mental attributes that allow me to race at this level when I deliver my own version of accomplishment. For others this maybe competing as a pro or perhaps just getting to the finish line. Accomplishment is always a personal journey. However, the real reason I love triathlon is because of how it has changed my life and the lives of so many others that I care about.

Let me try to explain why.....

I grew up in an abusive household. My father was extremely violent towards my mother for 40 odd years and was close to killing her on more than one occasion. He was also violent towards me and my sister occasionally and continuously abused all of us psychologically for many years. Even after we left the family home the fear and trauma continued and my mother and I have suffered with symptoms of PTSD in more recent years. Ironically my father also brought a lot of good to my life. He was a world class performance coach and coached at the highest level in his chosen sport at one time being ranked one of the best coaches in the game. As a result, I was able to get a unique insight in the the way coaches at this level behaved and processed information. This allowed me to develop similar skills and has contributed positively to the way I now live my life. In fact, it would be ignorant of me not to realise that even the traumatic events moulded me into a better version of myself. Not immediately but, over the years the way I have chosen to process and see my experiences has led to me becoming a more accomplished individual in all areas of my life. Do not get me wrong, I am by no means perfect and I have made many many mistakes (some of which have shamefully hurt others more than I am comfortable with) but these days every day is about using my life experiences to become a higher version of myself. I have even gone one step further and my professional life is about helping others to do the same.

So why triathlon? My 20+ years as a hockey player happened by default really. My father’s sport was hockey. I grew up involved in the sport and this resulted in me organically becoming a player and coach myself. However, the culture of hockey for me in many of the clubs I played at was one of win at all costs. This absolutely brought out the

worst in me and led to me developing a very warped view of what sport should really be about. All that mattered was winning and if this meant sledging, breaking down or even injuring your opponents then this was deemed acceptable. I never really had the passion for hockey that I should have and I never really achieved my potential but stayed in the sport out of habit. Professionally I worked in banking in parallel with my time in hockey. This environment was no better, in fact it was worse. Highly toxic, hypocritical, self serving, narcissist. This did not help bring out the positive parts of my personality either. All this combined with my only experiences of how to act in personal relationships made me into one unpleasant and unhappy individual. I would go as far as to say that I likely developed mild narcissistic personality disorder myself. This then damaged my personal relationships. I chose poor friends, I treated partners badly and I have to say I am ashamed of who I once was.

Ultimately, though, the path we choose can take us somewhere special in the end. There are two events in my life that contributed to making me a better version of myself, one was meeting my inspirational wife and the other was crossing that finish line in Lanzarote in 2012.

It is easy for life time triathletes to take the sport for granted but for someone like me, and many of those I now coach, triathlon offers a lot more than you could possibly imagine. For me it was many things:

- **It was mine!** Triathlon was something that had no connection to my family and more importantly my father. This was my journey done on my terms for me.
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- **It made me even more resilient and tested me to the limit both mentally and physically.** You only truly understand who you are when you are tested to the core and training properly for long distance tri certainly ticks that box. I already had high levels of resilience and great coping strategies due to my past but this allowed me to become more consciously aware of how I could use these strategies positively and proactively to do something of value.
- **It was exciting to find solutions.** The challenge of learning how to swim, bike and run properly and then put them all together over 220 kilometers is simply fascinating. I chose to be self coached from the start as this problem solving challenge fascinated me. It was enough for me to just follow someone else's plan.
- **It improved my behaviour towards others.** Nothing brings you down to earth and puts your ego in the box than the dark places Ironman takes you to. There is no place for those trying to dominate others in Ironman. The only person you are up against is yourself (in fact I believe this actually the real goal in life as a whole). There is no better way to find out how tough you really are than fighting against your own will to quit.
- **Improved my self awareness.** It helped me to understand what really mattered to me and what it was that helped me genuinely feel good about myself. For years I had chased short term fixes through partying and spending the rest of my time earning money doing bad things to fund my partying. It helped me recognise how wrong I had been about what I thought mattered in life. I realised that being better than others, having more possessions, socialising constantly and feeding off other

attention counted for very little in life and that I needed to be 'Johnathan Livingston Seagull' not just one of the flock (look it up)

- **Took me on a path to helping others.** I had learned so much about myself through Ironman that I wanted to share this experience with others. I wanted to find a way to help other people grow in the way I had and in doing so continue my own path to self betterment. This became so important to me that in 2015 I walked away from my job in banking to start the process of setting up my own coaching community. Three years later I have gone from coaching occasional swimming at my local pool to advanced performance coach in my own coaching studio with an Endless Pool, Watt Bikes, Wahoos, treadmill, massage room and... even better.... I get to work alongside with my amazing wife who is now a full time coach too. We have a community of 30 amazing fully coached athletes, a race team of 8 athletes (ranging from new athletes to those aiming for their pro license this year), and a further 30 odd athletes involved in our wider community. Many of the athletes we work with have themselves also experienced traumatic back grounds and it is a real privilege to be able to use our own knowledge and experiences to help them find the same level of fulfilment I have been lucky enough to through this great sport.
- **It taught me how to fail.** I had always been so deeply afraid of failing because the consequences of doing so were often so severe. I still find this challenging but to be successful at anything, especially something as complex as Ironman you have to be ready to fail and to embrace the fabulous learning opportunities failing can offer.
- **It made me feel worthwhile.** The control my father craved was based around dominating those close to him emotionally and part of that process is to break you down to believe you are nothing. Triathlon and subsequently coaching others made me feel that I was actually worth something and that I could mean something to other people too.
- **It helped me deal with change.** I had always suffered great anxiety when experiencing change. I still do to some extent but the build up to an Ironman requires you to be prepared for plenty of curve balls. I had to learn to expect these and adapt to them.
- **I learnt to only worry about things I could control and then make sure I did control them.** To have your state of mind ready to train for and race Ironman you need to be able to understand the difference between the things you can control and the things you can't. You have to be able to let go of things you cannot control and feel comfort in the knowledge that the things you can control have been dealt with.
- **I leaned what accomplishment really is.** In my past accomplishment always meant being better than others. This is simply nonsense. Accomplishment is about following the process and demonstrating the right behaviours to the best of your ability. If you do this, you are always a 'winner' regardless of the outcome relative to others. Outcomes can still represent accomplishment as it maybe that part of the process was tactical decision making. But it is not the outcome alone that defines if you are accomplished or not. We have so many false idols in the world these days, this is something society has really lost sight of and it makes me very sad. This

means so much to me that my entire coaching ethos is now based almost exclusively around this concept. This leads me onto my next 'why'

- **It has taught me what performance coaching really means to me.** Coaching is not about setting you sessions and motivating you to do them. Coaching is not about celebrating mediocrity just to make you feel better. Coaching is about developing a way of thinking, a way of acting, a set of behaviours, a set of values and a mindset in the coachee. Performance coaches do not measure the accomplishment of individuals by the performances and outcomes, they measure them through their execution of the 'hows', behaviours and their resulting coachability. If these are executed perfectly then the performance takes care of itself.
- **I leaned to work with what I have not what I hoped I'd have.** As my past had always been about dominating others I often got frustrated if I did not have what I need to achieve this. This, at it's worst, can lead to cheating or hurting others to get to where you want to. Triathlon has taught me, though better measures of accomplishment, that working with what you have is something you should embrace and take great pride in making the most of. Someone else always has less than you. Be grateful for what you have got.
- **It made me happy (ok maybe happier) and that only I was responsible for being happy.** It would be hard to say that I am truly happy. I am certain I will be and every day I am a happier person than the day before but for me my start point was a lot lower than I realised. Only one person is responsible for my happiness, that is me. I can choose to continue my journey towards happiness or I can choose to wait for it to happen. I know that being totally happy all the time is unrealistic and not even part of human nature so I must not expect that and embrace the tough times too as they are they help us grow. But I can expect to experience more frequent happy days as time goes by. Triathlon has given me so many tools to help find this happiness.
- **I have been able to be part of a wonderful community.** The community that my wife and I have created has done something wonderfully unexpected. I thought that by setting up a community based on the right values and behaviours would help others. Well it has done that but what I failed to realise was that it would help me even more. I have no doubt that the people you spend your time with has a bigger impact on your physical and mental health than anything else in life. Those that are part of our community think I am supporting them become better versions of themselves when really it is me that is being helped along that road to self betterment. I simply cannot thank them enough.

I hope that this insight maybe of use to some listeners. Many may not agree with how I see things and I am sure many will think I am some kind of utopian, new age nut case. I can assure you that if you met me you would likely think the opposite as I put on a convincing front. What I do know is that I have found something that has done more for me than I could have imagined. This has been my journey. I may not have still even been here had it not have been what triathlon has done for me in recent years. Never take for granted the privileges you have in life, you never know when they might be whipped away.