

Run for your Life

Stephen William ROWE

'Hi. Yes, it's me.

I've only a few secs. The reporters are hammering on the door, but I knew you'd want to hear.

Yes, I won.

Yes, again.

Yes, a new record. Not by much though, but anyway...

No. Not as tough as New York... cooler too.

No, no. I slept like a log. Nice hotel. With my VIP treatment, I don't have to be there hours in advance like the others.

Exactly, not far off thirty thousand.

Yes, Sven's here.

Yep, he was ok, but a little off form this year.

Yes, nice guy. Sends his love as usual.

I'll give you all the details when I get home.

I sighed.

No. I didn't forget the pills.

I rang off and arched my back and shoulders to help ease the tension out of that region. My knee was a bit sore, but otherwise, I was all right.

From behind me came Angela's soft voice.

Angela's my agent.

By now, she had reminded me so often that I now had it off pat, "You provide the bread, the sponsors the butter, but it's the press that spread the one on the other..."

Oh yes. I'd got the hang of that now.

It had taken me some time though.

When what you most need a cold beer, a shower, and an hour on the massage table, what you get is an hour with the world sporting press. The fact that I smell like a dead and rotting rat doesn't bother them. Mind you, they rarely come as close as my agent.

For her, of course, the perfume of dollars floating in the air smothers body odours, which my wife would never tolerate.

But sorry! You've no idea what I'm prattling on about, have you?

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I just won the Tokyo Marathon.

All 26 miles of it.

Well, when I say I won, I ought to be more specific.

I came first in my category.

They call it the “MV90” or something like that.

I'm 92 years old, you understand. So's my Norwegian pal Sven.

We started together, aged 65 or thereabouts...

Sometimes he wins, sometimes I do, or it's that damn American show-off, Jack.

He even just had all his teeth redone.

What a prat. I mean, really! At 91.

It's not as though that'll help him pull the girls, is it?

Well, that's American men for you...

Anyhow, this year, the scratch winner finished in just over two hours. Not bad...

I got in at seven hours and twenty-four minutes. Sven came in a quarter of an hour after me.

You think that that's pretty slow, eh!

Well, it's still about twice as fast as most people walk.

Try it. Go on, and you'll see.

Tomorrow is going to be hell, as usual.

And the day after too.

I'll feel clapped out for days. But nobody will hear about that.

I won't hobble about with painful cramps or anything like that. With all the training, that's a thing of the past.

But I will feel exhausted. Also, I'll drag myself yawning from place to place all day.

I'll also sleep poorly for a day or two until my body recovers.

That takes a hell of a long time nowadays.

Well, you can't have everything, can you?

Anyhow, this part of the truth about running doesn't interest the sporting press. It won't be analysed by track and field specialists around the world. It won't be part of the questions put to me on TV sports programs either.

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What they all want is to project an image of what every other human should be aiming at.

The last thing they want to publicise is that afterwards, you'll probably feel like your last day has come. You'll look like it too.

Naturally enough, sports gear manufacturers see the old-age runner as a vast potential market.

They're counting on there being more and more old people around, which means a potentially juicy long-term market.

So, they want to convince all the over-sixties to buy expensive running shoes and high-tech clothes and get healthy and happy.

And that's where money looms its head in my case.

Same thing for Sven, too.

Jack, the American show-off as well.

More precisely, it looms more to my manager Angela than to me.

She gets twenty per cent, you see.

At 92, I'm happy just being able to travel for free, stay in top-class hotels, and have people being extra friendly with me.

Fast cars and hot women have lost much of their pull on me these days.

My children will appreciate the money when I start the final long run, which is fine by me.

But by now, you'll want to know just how I became one of the best-known runners in the world.

We'll skip the official story, though. Even though the one Angela concocted is admittedly impressive.

It's packed to overflowing with healthy lifestyle promotion anecdotes and titbits.

Above all, it fits in perfectly with the values projected by international running gear manufacturers and especially with those of my sponsors.

However, you'd no doubt prefer the true story of how I became world famous.

Well, to start with and to be honest, I did have a predisposition for endurance sports.

But at first sight, it's different from what you'd expect.

But, disappointingly for Angela, when she took over from my wife, she discovered that at school, I was no good at anything.

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I was not bright or even any good at sports.

I wasn't a dunce.

That said, I was pretty close to being one if the truth is told.

I certainly was not headed for high finance or any sort of lucrative employment.

And that's how I ended up as a road sweeper...

Not very glamorous, eh?

I bet you wouldn't have guessed that.

I can also assure you that it was even less glamorous when it was raining, which always seemed to be the case when I was fifteen.

Not very impressive on a CV, eh?

Angela quickly sorted that out nicely, though, and packaged it carefully for the sponsors and press.

When I was twenty, I was promoted...

Well, in fact, that's not quite the right way of putting things.

I had a bit of an accident, and as it was their fault, the town council offered me a change of employment.

I became the cleaner for the town hall.

The job was the same, except that I had to wash and polish, as well as sweep.

Mind you, it didn't rain so much indoors, which was a blessing.

It was also easier on my knee, which still gives me trouble from time to time.

As was my wont, I was thorough and kept the place spotless and shining.

I like doing things properly and take pride in the results.

This led to an unexpected offer from a local businessman.

And so, I became the cleaner of the marble and stainless-steel head offices of SpanBridge International.

I stayed there until retirement.

The Old Man even gave me a Rolex as a retirement present.

Not a gold one, of course.

Worth a year's salary all the same. Not bad for an old floor sweeper.

I still have it.

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The long and short of things is that I spent eight hours a day on my feet for fifty years.

That's the only predisposition I can boast of concerning sport.

Not impressive, but that's how it was.

Well, when I say not impressive...

If you tot it all up, it means I spent one hundred and twenty thousand working hours on my feet.

To that, you can add a total of fifteen thousand miles of walking, going back and forth to work.

Additionally, I also had to climb, sweep, and wash over a million granite stair steps, all told.

It was all those stairs which gave me the most trouble, what with my knee, but after a while, I got used to it.

And then, when I retired, all this physical activity stopped abruptly.

Luckily, I retired only a few days before the Olympic games began.

I don't know why, but I've always loved following that sort of thing on television. That and Rugger.

Oh! And Wimbledon tennis and downhill skiing too.

Ok. ok, you're saying. Get on with it.

All right.

Well... As for all normal Englishmen, watching the Olympics without a mug of tea just isn't done.

And, as the Olympics goes on and on nonstop, regular refills become mandatory.

So, getting this done without missing a critical bit requires careful planning.

I'm pretty good at planning, so I soon had this tea thing off to a tee (tee hee hee).

I warned you I was almost a dunce, didn't I...

Anyway, as soon as there was a lull in the action, or if someone I didn't like injured himself or herself, I'd dash off to the kitchen.

This quickly became an amusing game. A challenge of sorts.

In a way, it gave me the impression to be taking part in the Olympic game myself in some small way.

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I experimented with something new on the third day, just before the high jump semi-finals.

Heaven knows why, but I wanted to see how many times I could get from the kettle, back into the sitting room, around my armchair and back again before it boiled.

The first time I managed three times.

On the fourth day, I extended the challenge to add a complete tour of the sitting room.

On the fifth, I added a climb of the stairs to the loo.

I had to be careful on the way back down though, which goes without saying.

This was all great fun, and I didn't have the impression that I was not doing anything odd at all. On the contrary, it was as if this had always been part of my existence.

The weather was lovely at the beginning of the second week of the Olympic games.

So, I opened the back door and stood looking out across my vegetable garden, where the beans were coming along nicely.

The new challenge instantly became; kettle, sitting room, stairs, loo, back garden, around the beans and back.

What the neighbours thought, heaven knows.

I didn't ask.

When I had to go to the local supermarket that Wednesday, I timed my outing between the eight-hundred-metre semi-finals and the Decathlon hurdles.

There was a mix-up at the tills, and consulting my watch, I grimaced as the fatal hour approached. A promising young Englishwoman was competing, and I particularly wanted to encourage her.

As soon as I was outside, I trundled away with the heavily laden shopping trolley.

As soon as I could, I started to trot and then run, trailing the shopping trolley behind me, bouncing happily.

I got home, panting, just in time to switch on the kettle and dash to the sitting room.

I then did a bit of sprinting back and forth to put the frozen veg into the freezer.

Well, so that's how it all started.

When the games finished, I kept up the activity. Heaven knows why.

I then got into the habit of always jogging back from the supermarket with the bouncing shopping trolley.

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Then I added an unnecessary extra circuit around the block of houses.

Gradually the neighbours got used to my peculiar antics.

Then, one day, I spotted some runners jogging along the bridleway of the local canal.

So, I dragged my shopping trolley down there, loaded it half full of potatoes, and set off along the track.

Oddly enough, I experienced no cramps or pains or breathlessness. Still, even so, I turned back after fifteen minutes during that first week.

My knee was a bit sore, which was to be expected, but that was all.

After a few weeks, the young runners became used to my presence and to my bouncing shopping trolley.

I then decided to fill it entirely with potatoes, which made it much more stable.

Sometimes a young runner would jog along with me, and we would chat about this or that, and this quickly became an integral part of my days.

None of the young men and women realised that I did this every day.

They simply assumed that I ran the same days as they did.

I didn't realise this until months later.

Then, one day, a very agreeably shaped young woman in skin-tight clothes told me she was running a local five-kilometre event to raise funds for the children's hospital.

Five kilometres seemed unimaginable to me, and I said so.

The girl stopped short, 'But that's what we've just done!'

'Is it? Are you sure?'

'Of course, I am. I do it twice to do the ten. You won't be able to take your trolley, of course,' she laughed.

I was amazed. Five kilometres...

Every day...

That's thirty-five per week.

Mind you, thinking back to my working days, I must have walked that every day for fifty years when adding my trip on foot to work and back.

Well, I turned up, paid my fees, and ran the five kilometres.

I came in last, of course, but then I was simply jogging at my normal speed.

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To my utter astonishment, I was cheered all the way around the route, especially along the last hundred metres.

What an incredible sensation this was. I could hardly believe how enthusiastic everyone was. And how nice to me.

Then one of the organisers came over and asked if I'd like to participate in a ten-kilometre race he was organising.

He gave me a flyer, but ten K is twice five, as some of you might already know.

Over the next few weeks, several of my canal run companions asked if I would be going.

So, in the end, I did.

I arrived last again.

However, I felt little affected by the effort, except for a bit of stiffness, which my Monday morning outing dispelled.

And that is how it all started.

I kept my shopping trolley but added a double five-kilometre outing every four times.

Then, one day, a hard-training young athlete introduced me to strap-on ankle and wrist weights. This was a discovery for me.

Two point five kilos on each ankle and one on each wrist made running more natural and much more manageable.

I looked more "normal", too.

Well, as normal as I could, if you see what I mean.

Anyway, I soon became a well-known figure at regional ten-kilometre races.

Sometimes, I wasn't even last.

I made a lot of friends at this.

However, most of them were a third of my age or half...

There was a good proportion of exceedingly nicely shaped young women amongst them, which was an added bonus.

At Christmas that year, I prepared for a New Year's Day race. But at the last minute, I discovered that the ten-kilometre distance was not part of it.

I am still figuring out why I decided to try the half-marathon in its place.

I did it though.

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What was unexpected was that several runners doubled back after crossing the finishing line and accompanied me for the last kilometres.

It was absolutely amazing.

And I wasn't even last, either.

I won a cup.

A big shining cup for the first post-sixties participant, or MV60 category as it's now called, I think.

I still have it, but it's now surrounded by many more, bigger, and more splendid.

But this was my very first victory cup, and I was fast approaching my seventieth birthday.

The MV70 was thus now looming on the horizon.

Then, gradually, the marathon crept up on me without my noticing it.

It did so stealthily, silently, gradually entwining its long slender fingers in my hair.

I still have a good head of hair, incidentally...

It slowly tugged at me, enticing me to have a go.

But it took another year before I tried out the distance.

I tried out one locally, and it took me six hours.

It then took me six days to recover. Or more.

That's when I met Angela.

She came and jogged the final kilometres with me and chatted me across the finishing line.

Amazingly, I discovered she was the young Englishwoman I witnessed winning the Olympic hurdles gold medal. That was the same day I started the new circuit around the garden and up the stairs. Odd coincidence that...

She was exceedingly kind and gave me all sorts of tips for the recovery period.

She knew what she was talking about, of course. I had absolute confidence in that. This wasn't book-learned advice.

So, when I finally needed someone to manage things, I phoned her, and that was that.

That's twenty years ago, and she is still just as kind, even more so.

She accompanies me, looks after me and makes sure everything goes smoothly.

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She ensures that I eat and drink what I should when I should and get the medical attention needed, especially for the old knee, which still gets pretty sore.

We get on exceptionally well, and she knows how to negotiate terms better than I ever could.

We make a good team.

Our next term together will be for the London Marathon, my twenty-fifth marathon.

After that, Angela suggests the Madrid marathon.

Maybe I'll do it, maybe not.

We get the Madrid Marriott, which is lovely.

The hotel staff know me now and are always exceptionally kind to me. However, twenty-six miles is still Forty-two kilometres, and seven hours and a half is still a long time...

Maybe I'll give it a miss this year.

I don't know.

Angela says, "Listen to your body. When it says stop. You stop. That's all."

Maybe it's time. I'll be ninety-four then.

But the Marriott's nice. I like it there.

And especially, I'd hate that damn flashy-toothed American show-off, Jack, to profit by my absence.

Anyway, we'll see.

'Ok, Angela...' I called over my shoulder. 'I'm coming. Can't keep the press waiting.'

I swivelled around on the chair and gazed about, 'Now, where on earth, have I put my prosthetic leg?'