

*UNSINKABLE* is an inspirational, humorous, and heart-wrenching tale of persevering after facing life's most difficult realities.

Weeks after a joy-filled footballing trip around France, joined by family and friends, Alan Corcoran learned his dad, Milo, had stage four cancer. Just days later, Milo died. Grief-stricken, twenty-five-year-old Alan decided to raise money for charity by attempting a 500-kilometre length-of-Ireland sea swim (fifteen times the distance of the English Channel) from the Giant's Causeway on the north coast to Waterford on the south coast.

Corcoran takes to the pool and prepares in solitude. Eight months later, he dives into the coldest deep end to begin his open-water swimming adventure.

Will he sink or swim?

'Alan embodies the adventure, joy, and challenge of outdoor swimming'  
**THE OUTDOOR SWIMMING SOCIETY**

'Extraordinary'  
**SEAN CONWAY**

'Epic'  
**SWIMSWAM MAGAZINE**

'Incredible'  
**SWIMMING WORLD MAGAZINE**

 Tivoli Publishing House

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Non-fiction/Memoir

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ALAN  
CORCORAN

UNSINKABLE

ALAN CORCORAN

UNSINKABLE



**CANCER, FIVE BOATS, AND MY 500  
710-KILOMETRE SEA SWIM**

## Praise for *Unsinkable*

‘Authentic Irish story-telling at its best and a fitting tribute to his father, Milo.’ – **Martin O’Neill OBE**, author of *On Days Like These* and International and Premier League football manager

‘Beautifully written, heart-wrenching, and inspirational’ – **Tom Gregory**, author of *A Boy in the Water* (William Hill Sports Book of the Year) and the youngest person to swim the English Channel

‘*Unsinkable* will make you laugh, cry, and cheer for the dogged adventurer’ – **Anna Deacon** and **Vicky Allan**, authors of *Taking the Plunge* and *The Art of Wild Swimming* series

‘Alan embodies the adventure, joy, and challenge of outdoor swimming’ – **The Outdoor Swimming Society**

‘*Unsinkable* is an incredible tale of glory and achievement borne from loss and pain’ – **Swimming World Magazine**

‘As Irish adventures go, this must be one of the most extraordinary and difficult to date. *Unsinkable* is an astounding story, brilliantly told with a unique voice’ – **Sean Conway**, author of *Hell and High Water*

‘An empowering and inspirational story of the human spirit, grit, and determination’ – **Jordan Wylie MBE**, Sunday Times best-selling author of *The Power of the Paddle* and record-breaking adventurer

‘Like all the best swimming books, *Unsinkable* is about much more than swimming. It’s about life and death, love and friendship, and grief and survival. It’s about how whimsical ideas can turn into inspiring trials of endurance, courage, and resolve. You might think you’re joining Alan on a journey around Ireland, but it’s a journey into his soul. Rest assured, he’s great company’ – **Outdoor Swimmer Magazine**

‘A raw account of grief and what it takes to swim the length of Ireland’ – **World Open Water Swimming Association**

‘A well-crafted independent memoir that opens the hatch to an awe-inspiring endeavour...Corcoran fashions full-fledged portraits of his main characters by playfully sprinkling Irish phrases throughout...We applaud his openness and ability to weave humour and levity through grief and hardship’ – **Booklist** (awarded a Starred Review)

‘Alan does a fantastic job at recounting his adventure. A remarkable read. Corcoran doesn’t pull any punches in his distinctive and entertaining warts-and-all tale’ – **Damian Browne**, rowed the Atlantic Ocean twice, is a rugby Heineken Cup winner, and *Deep Roots* podcast host

‘A fascinating insight of a novice swimmer taking on the ferocious extremes of the Irish Sea’ – **Dr Heather Massey**, Senior Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth’s Extreme Environments Lab and English Channel swimmer

‘Alan turns grief into greatness through his epic swim’ – **SwimSwam Magazine**

‘A magnificent memoir. Pure mind over matter’ – **Keith Barry**, author of *Brain Hacks* and world-renowned mentalist

‘Searingly honest. A moving story fuelled by grief and sprinkled with great Irish humour’ – **Rob Delaney**, comedian and author of *A Heart That Works*

‘Alan’s story captures his fight with precision. *Unsinkable* is one to watch for in An Post’s Sports Book of the Year 2023’ – **Kellie Harrington**, author of *Kellie* (An Post Sports Book of the Year winner) and Olympic, World, and European Champion boxer

‘Powerful, riveting, and an enthralling read’ – **The Belfast Telegraph**

'A sincere and emotional story of grief, resilience, and determination. It's hard not to root for *Unsinkable's* charming protagonist' – **Professor Greg Whyte OBE**, Olympian, Professor of Sport & Exercise Science, author of *Achieve the Impossible*

'Funny, sad, and insightful. Bravo, Alan' – **Lewis Pugh**, United Nations Patron of the Oceans, endurance swimmer, and author of *Achieving the Impossible*

'Well-written, authentic, and gripping...truly inspirational... delightful illustrations...Corcoran offers an enjoyable colloquial Irish narrative that's easy to follow...beautiful prose' – **Library Journal** (awarded Star Book)

'I have yet to read a better swimming memoir than *Unsinkable*. Alan takes us readers on an absolute rollercoaster. An utterly brilliant book' – **Calum Maclean**, author of *1001 Outdoor Swimming Tips*

'Five out of five...an extraordinary account of determination and tenacity...a hugely enjoyable romp of an adventure through the treacherous waters of the Irish Sea. As *Marathon Man* was, *Unsinkable* is a beacon of inspiration' – **The World of Nonfiction Books**

*By the same award-winning author:*

Marathon Man: My Life, My Father's Stroke, and Running 35  
Marathons in 35 Days

# UNSINKABLE

Cancer, Five Boats, and my 500  
710-Kilometre Sea Swim

Alan Corcoran



Tivoli Publishing  
House



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House**

[www.marathonman.co](http://www.marathonman.co)

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Typeset by Alan Corcoran

You taught me that tattoos are horrible altogether,  
motorcycles are deadly, the sea is lethal, and running  
thirty-five consecutive marathons would destroy my knees.  
I didn't listen. This book is dedicated to you, Mam,  
for putting up with all my shenanigans.





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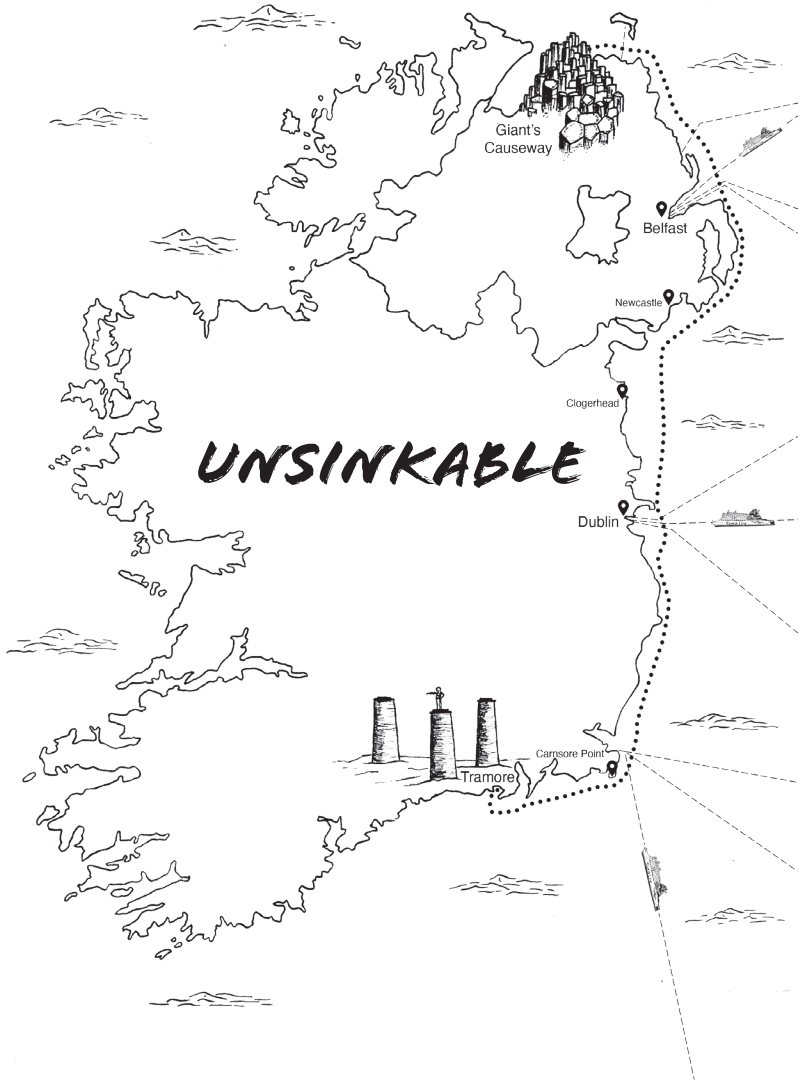
*Acknowledgements*

*Appendices: Training, Gear, and Stats*

## **Author's Note**

To write my memoir, I relied on my journal, social media posts, memory, interviews with participants, film footage, and video diaries from my *Unsinkable* documentary movie.

To preserve the anonymity of specific individuals, I changed the following names, listed in alphabetical order: Charlie and Jim.



Giant's Causeway

Belfast

Newcastle

Clogerhead

Dublin

Carrigrohane Point

Tramore

**UNSINKABLE**



## PROLOGUE

Ten RNLI volunteers assembled at Newcastle Harbour, County Down. They came prepared, wearing their yellow waterproofs, red lifejackets, and white helmets. Coastguard officials joined in equal numbers, getting dressed into their overalls and safety gear.

‘Morning, Alan. You’re becoming the talk of the town, a bit of a local celeb.’

‘How’s it going, Lisa?’ I said to the RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) officer, nodding to the heavens and feeling my cheeks reddening. ‘Yeah, more like a local pain in the arse. Real sorry about all this hassle.’

‘That’s what we’re here for; not to worry. Follow me. Brace yourself,’ Lisa said, leading me towards the pier wall.

‘Morning, Alan!’ Seamus said. I looked down from the pier. The local fisherman smiled and waved, standing in his T-shirt and trousers while up to his neck in the frigid water. A swarm of moon jellyfish bobbed around him like discarded plastic bags, but Seamus was unfazed, focused on helping me out. ‘I found her like this ten minutes ago. I’m just getting her out of harm’s way, is all.’ Seamus waded towards the slipway, gripping my damaged support boat with his left hand and scooping his right arm forwards like a digger.

‘I think I might need a bigger milk carton to bail the water out this time. What do you think?’ I said, grinning and bearing the sorry situation.

The orange and black tubing along one side of my rigid inflatable boat (RIB) held its breath, full lungs ensuring this side remained just above the water. The tubing on the opposite side of the RIB was flat as a floppy pancake and drowning.

I walked over to the concrete boat slip to assess the problem

head-on. I tilted my head forty-five degrees, hoping if I matched the boat's angle, things mightn't look so dire. It was no use.

'The milk carton won't fix this one,' I said.

A volunteer patted my back. 'Ah, I'm really sorry, Alan.'

My support boat was the size of a convertible car, and I had no trailer to wheel it from the sea. The locals and I would have to lug the boat from the water for the second time this week. Five of us gripped the rubber handles on the left side, while five others took the right side. Two were on plank duty. Taking a leaf from the pyramid builders, we placed a handful of wooden posts on the incline, grunted, and heaved the boat upwards. Orange paint flaked off as the boat's fibreglass hull shrilled against the timber like nails on a chalkboard. I winced, thinking of the damage, and a chill shivered up my spine. We inched forwards in group bursts on the count of three. I stared skywards as fifty-euro notes with fluffy wings flew away.

The sight at the top of the slipway was harsher than the piercing scrapes – the battered boat laid out on the asphalt against the car park's cinder block wall.

Once we set the RIB aside, I began discussing my project's fate with the RNLI volunteers and Coastguard. With my support boat out of action, I hadn't much choice. After 210 kilometres of punishing sea swimming, Murphy's Law sank my boat and ended my charity challenge.

I saw the relief on the faces of the safety volunteers, no longer on standby for another assistance callout.

'Ah, look, it's desperate, I know,' a volunteer said. 'You put in so much effort, but it's the right call. To be fair, I would have quit long ago. It's a wonder you swam this far, so fair play to ya.'

The morning's commotion calmed, and everyone disappeared. 'Ugh, fuckin' hell,' I muttered to myself.

I could feel the warmth of the breakwater boulders through my shorts as I sat in solitude on the shoreline. Seagulls cawed overhead. The cold swell flowed towards me and pulled away, wet splashes landing on the tips of my trainers and seeping through to my toes – taunting me.

With the mighty Mourne Mountains behind me, I inhaled

the aroma of the salty seaweed and stared across Dundrum Bay, and sighed. The scenery appeared as though viewed through the bottom of a pint glass – streams flowing down my adventure-beaten face, and into my dishevelled beard.

I had hoped to become the first to swim the length of the island of Ireland – 500 kilometres of sea swimming – from the Giant’s Causeway on the north coast to my home of County Waterford on the south coast.

It was June 2017. After nearly thirty days of battle, this was where I had to accept defeat.

In that moment of loneliness, I was not a twenty-six-year-old man. I was a wounded boy, mourning much more than a personal pursuit. The premature end to my adventure forced me to stop and sit still in the reality that my dad, Milo, was dead. I’d failed in my tribute to him. I’d let him down. I wanted to feel his comforting arm around my shoulder and hear his reassuring voice telling me it would be alright, that I’d honoured him in the act of giving it a proper bash, despite the wreckage. That wasn’t going to happen. Wanting my dad’s presence, I was alone and inconsolable. Time froze as I stewed in misery.



Those sinking feelings were a country mile from the life-affirming joy I’d experienced at the end of my previous charity adventure. Five years earlier, by 30 June 2012, my dad had worked tirelessly for fifteen months to recover from a debilitating stroke. He stood proud, alive, and free on that glorious summer’s day, embracing me with a wide grin beneath the Waterford Viking Marathon finish banner.

‘You did it! Some man for one man, Al,’ Dad said.

I gave him a tight hug, landing a sweaty kiss on his smiling cheek. ‘Sure, didn’t I tell you we would!’

Fundraising €15,000 for the Irish Heart Foundation, National Rehabilitation Hospital, and Football Village of Hope, I’d run thirty-five marathons (1,500 kilometres) in thirty-five consecutive days around Ireland’s coast. Dad had returned from the brink. My family triumphed over adversity.



Five years on, though – on the rocks of Newcastle, County Down – hardship wasn't willing to let go of its suffocating stranglehold. *Where do I go from here?* I wondered.