
Opening Extract from...

A Life Without Limits

Written by Chrissie Wellington
with Michael Aylwin

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with Michael Aylwin

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To my family. My foundation.
My victories are also yours.

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1

The Ironman

The ironman. Just the name excites me. It is one of the most awe-inspiring events in sport. I fell in love with it the first time I attended one – and that was as a mere spectator, less than five months earlier.

It's a question of scale. Biggest is not necessarily best, they say, but it is when it comes to endurance sport. There is a special mystique about the marathon, for example, because of its length – but that's just the bit you do at the end of an ironman.

That first taste I had of an ironman was in June 2007, at Ironman Switzerland in Zurich. I was there because the day before I had competed in, and won, an Olympic-distance triathlon (in length, less than a quarter of an ironman). Immediately, I realised that the ironman was the main event. The sense of occasion had risen with the length of the race.

There is a special buzz that hangs in the air, like when the best team in the world comes to town. The occasion inspires extraordinary things in people – extraordinary excitement in those watching, extraordinary levels of performance from those competing.

But what raises ironman above other sports is the visceral nature of the contest against a fixed and unyielding foe: the contest against the race itself. You see humanity at its rawest, at its best and its worst.

The ironman brings that out in you. Finishing it is a victory. People vomit at the side of the road, they lose control of their basic functions, they collapse, they become delirious, desperate to reach the finish line, when sometimes that finish line is still miles away. It evokes such emotion and requires you to dig to the depths, physically and mentally. And then there is the euphoria and relief of making it to the end. Inspirational is the only word to describe it. You don't get that from a game of cricket or football.

The first ironman triathlon took place on my first birthday, 18 February 1978. It started life as an argument. Who were fitter, runners or swimmers? The debate raged around one table at an awards ceremony after a running race on Oahu, Hawaii. John Collins, a US Navy commander, threw cyclists into the mix, having read that Eddy Merckx, the Belgian cyclist, had the highest oxygen uptake of any athlete ever measured. There and then, it occurred to him that, if they combined the Waikiki Roughwater Swim, the Around Oahu Bike Race and the Honolulu Marathon, they would have the perfect test to settle the argument. The first to finish would be called the Ironman. He leaped onto the stage, grabbed the microphone and proclaimed his idea. They laughed at it.

Nevertheless, a year later the first 'Ironman' was contested by Collins and his friends. Fifteen competitors started; twelve finished. The winner was Gordon Haller, a taxi driver, completing the 140.6 miles in a little under twelve hours. Collins finished in seventeen hours.

The following year's race attracted the attention of a passing journalist, who wrote an article for *Sports Illustrated* describing what he saw. This inspired hundreds to compete in 1980. In 1981 the race was moved from Oahu to its current home, the less-populated Hawaii Island, or 'the Big Island', as it is fondly nicknamed. The US network ABC expressed an interest in covering the race. And in 1982, its legend was sealed.

That year, a young student called Julie Moss decided to compete in the Ironman as part of the thesis for her degree in physical education. Apart from a passion for surfing, she had little experience of competitive sport, but, incredibly, she found herself leading the women's race by mile eight of the marathon. The longer she held the lead, the more determined she became to win – and the less able to carry on. With each step she was reaching deeper and deeper inside herself.

She collapsed for the first time a few hundred yards from the finish. She managed to get back to her feet and carry on, with the nearest female competitor still a few minutes behind, but her body was shutting down. The crowd formed a tunnel, urging her on, while volunteers rushed to her aid. She fended them off, knowing that their support would disqualify her. Night had fallen, and the merciless lights of the ABC cameras captured her struggle. She collapsed again only twenty yards from the line. Volunteers tried to lift her to her feet, but she would not be helped. At that point, Kathleen McCartney, the second-placed female, ran past, oblivious, and trotted to the finish line where she was pronounced champion. Moss crawled the remaining yards to the line on her bloodied hands and knees, reaching it twenty-nine seconds later, after more than eleven hours of racing.

It was a drama that captured the imagination of millions of Americans and has become a part of the sport's folklore. Now ironman races proliferate around the world. The original race has turned into the annual World Championships, contested by 1,800 athletes, cheered on by thousands of spectators in Hawaii on the weekend of the first full moon in October. More than 50,000 hopefuls try to qualify for it each year.

The buzz at any ironman, let alone the World Championships, is palpable. Among the athletes it is born of a nervous excitement about

what might lie ahead. For the elite the question might be, will I win today? But, even for them and certainly for everyone else, the main question is, will I finish and at what cost? Even if your body does not break down through sheer fatigue, there is ample scope for an unsuspected injury, be it in the mass brawl that is the swim, the high-speed road race on the bike, or the relentless pounding of the streets as you drag yourself through the marathon. The effects of any illness are magnified in bodies that are being pushed to their limit. And then there is the perennial threat of mechanical failure on the bike, gastro-intestinal problems, dehydration or overheating.

As a result, the rituals of the ironman athlete are meticulous. From the pre-dawn breakfast, it is down to the start with hundreds of other athletes to begin the extensive application of Vaseline. It pays not to stand on ceremony. Chafing is one of the ironman athlete's worst enemies. It may not stop you, but it hurts like hell, mostly round the crotch, the underarms and the nipples. These areas need copious amounts of lubrication. The less shame you have about it the better for your race.

Ideally, you take to the water and warm up about fifteen minutes before the start. Ironman swims are almost always conducted in open water. The temperature determines whether you are allowed a wetsuit. As the start approaches, you scull in the water, lying on your front, staying afloat, waiting for the gun. At some races, as in the tropical waters off Hawaii, this can be one of the most beautiful, sublime moments of your year – certainly of your day.

Then the gun goes off, and all hell breaks loose. The idea is to get 'on the feet' of the fastest swimmers, in other words to move in behind them and take advantage of their slipstream. It is, effectively, a fight. Limbs flail and can catch you anywhere on your person. People might swim over the top of you. The water churns up, making it difficult to breathe. If the sea is choppy it is worse still. You are in a washing machine.

For the elite, this will go on for around an hour. For anyone who wants to continue beyond the swim, it must not go on for more than two hours and twenty minutes. Here is another cruelty to contend with – the cut-off times. If you do not complete the 2.4-mile swim in that time, you are not allowed to continue. The same applies to the other two disciplines. If you are still cycling ten and a half hours after the start, you must stop. And at midnight, seventeen hours after the start, the officials head out onto the course to round up those still pounding the streets to tell them they haven't made it.

The resultant scenes are heart-rending. You might think that people would feel relieved to be spared further punishment on a course that is so clearly beating them, but no, that is not the ironman way. They are distraught, inconsolable that they will not be allowed to finish what they had started, not just a few hours earlier when they began the race but years earlier when they began to dream. Everybody has their own reason for taking on an ironman; nobody enters into it with anything less than all their heart.

Once you've found your bike in the area known as 'transition' (this should take you around two minutes), it is out onto the open road, where the best will take the next four and a half to five hours to complete the 112-mile bike course. The sun rises ever higher during this stage. In hot countries, this is when the race becomes truly punishing. But rain brings its own problems too, and wind, particularly when combined with either of the above, can play havoc. A tailwind is all right, but riding into a headwind is much the same as riding up a hill. Crosswinds are even worse. If they are strong enough they are quite unnerving, making the bike difficult to control and sometimes blowing you off the road.

It is on the bike that you may first develop a need for the toilet. Again, it pays not to be squeamish. There is the occasional Portaloo on the course, but the most time-efficient solution, I find, is to go in my pants. If you're on the run, a quick crouch over a roadside ditch

is acceptable. But on the bike, unless a flat tyre causes a natural break, going on the saddle is the best way. This is when the earlier application of Vaseline really comes into its own. And don't underestimate the use of urine as a weapon. On the bike it is forbidden to take advantage of someone's slipstream, even though it is allowed in the swim. We call it drafting. To get too close to the bike in front is not only dangerous but cheating. There are a series of official penalties for anyone caught doing it, but people still do. If anyone does it to me, I let off a warning shot, and they usually back off. It is yet another reason to keep yourself hydrated.

The final leg is when even the best start to wrestle with their demons. After 112 miles sitting on an unforgiving saddle, crouched low over the handlebars to maximise your aerodynamics and pumping your legs remorselessly, taking to your feet for the marathon can be a strange sensation. Your legs will feel like jelly for the first few minutes, but that will pass. Soon they will feel like lead.

It is impossible to swim, bike and run for the best part of a day and not experience bad times. Illness, dehydration and physical niggles, not to mention full-blown injuries, come and go throughout. There is also the mental anguish – that long road stretching out ahead of you, the landmarks that just won't come quickly enough. You can't listen to music; you have only the throb of blood through your head for company, and the screams of every unthinking fibre in your body that they want to stop. This is when the mind must take over. Ironman is as much a mental game as a physical one.

Everything is redeemed, though, by the sight of the finish line. The crowds, whose exhortations around the course lift many a flagging body and soul, focus all of their energy around the final few yards. Whether you finish first or 1,001st, they make you feel like a champion. Your body may be wrecked, muscles cramping, skin chafing, toenails falling off and feet blistering, but you have joined a special club. After all of my races, I stay at the finish line all night to

welcome people home. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. We professionals do nothing but eat, sleep and train for these events, but it's the thousands who take on an ironman for the love of it who inspire me the most.

Julie Moss was the first great hero of the sport, but there have been countless others since, and most of them get nowhere near the podium. People fighting old age, illness and disability, those recovering from horrific injury, others simply wrestling with the demands of a day job – these are the heroes of ironman.

Sport has a unique ability to inspire and empower. If used correctly, it can be such a force for good. Ironman is a relatively new pursuit and, although it grows exponentially each year, it is still a 'minority' sport. Maybe this freshness is what gives it its energy, but there is something about its gruelling nature, as well, that inspires people to find the best in themselves and in each other. Because, make no mistake – that is what it does. The ironman walked into my life quite suddenly, and changed it for ever.

2

Out of Norfolk

It's at this point in a sporting autobiography that the author traditionally launches into an account of the brilliant athletic achievements of their youth, of how they were always destined to become a professional athlete. Unfortunately, I have no such tale to tell.

I did play wing attack in the Downham Market High School netball team that won the Norfolk Schools Championship in 1993. And I wasn't a bad swimmer. I won the odd race at the Thetford Dolphins Swimming Club, although Julie Williams would usually beat me.

And that's about it in terms of sporting achievement for the first twenty-five years of my life. Mine really is the story of the accidental athlete. When your nickname is Muppet, the chances are you are not a child prodigy.

But if there was one thing that marked me out as unusual it was my drive. I would go so far as to describe it as obsessive-compulsive. I have, and always have had, the most powerful urge to make the best of myself. At times I have not been able to control it; at times it has taken me to some unpleasant places; but it is also an essential part of who I am, and I cannot make any apology for this.

My early sporting career might have been modest, but my academic career was more impressive. I attribute that to my determination, as I

do the success I enjoyed as a civil servant in my career before triathlon. But, as a sensitive soul who has always worried – too much most of the time – about what other people think of her, this obsession with self-improvement has often spilled into other less positive preoccupations.

My relationship with my body has been a difficult one over the years. At times I have loved it, at times I have despaired of it, at times I have seen it as little more than a plaything to be bent to my will, as if it were somehow separate from me.

It's a control thing. I am a control freak, basically. Which is good and bad. If there is something you don't like about your life, then to me it is perfectly possible and logical to change it. That's the good side. The bad side is that hideous feeling of panic and anger when you come up against something you can't control. And then there is the danger that the idea of being in control itself gets out of control, so that it becomes an end in itself and causes you to lose sight of everything else. Addiction might be another way of putting that.

I have an addictive personality. Sport is my drug of choice these days. It's one of the best drugs there is. It keeps you fit and healthy, even if, in the case of ironman, it pushes your body to the limit. The word 'addiction' comes with negative connotations, but it doesn't have to be a damaging impulse. It's all about channelling your craving into something positive. Family, friends and coaches are invaluable sources of objectivity, able to know you in a way you can never know yourself – from the outside – and able to look out for signs of negative addiction that you may be unable to recognise. But in time you get to know yourself, and with a better understanding of yourself comes the ability to modulate the highs and lows. More of the control, less of the freak.

I love my body now, not because I like what I see in the mirror particularly, more because I no longer look in the mirror and see just contours of flesh and colour, there to be scrutinised and manipulated. Now I see my body as a holistic system that enables me to do

what I do. More importantly, I see it as bound up intricately with *me*, enabling me to be who I am. That change has been a gradual one, but it is sport that helped me to initiate it and certainly to consolidate it. Which is strange – or maybe it's not – because, as much as I have always adored sport, it used to be the one area of my life where I'd let myself off the drive for self-improvement. It was simply a way of making friends, which is its beauty, no matter how good you are at it.

I have barely any sporting pedigree. My paternal grandfather, Harry, was a keen cricketer and cyclist. On a weekend he would think nothing of cycling from London to Southend. But neither of my parents, Lin and Steve, have ever shown any passion for competitive sport. They have always loved the outdoors – so much of our family life was spent in the fresh air – but I know of no sporting ambitions before or after my brother, Matty, and I came along. Even if they had harboured them, there would have been no time to indulge, what with all the ferrying around they had to do, taking Matty and me to this and that. Because I might not have shown any exceptional talent, but I was mad about sport. I was mad about everything.

My overwhelming memory of childhood is of a happy one. I was born in Bury St Edmunds Hospital in 1977 and brought up in the house where my parents live to this day, in the village of Feltwell in Norfolk. We were never rich, but neither did we want for anything, especially in the way of love and support. Dad worked as a printer and then, when I was a young girl, he became a sales rep, selling paper to the print trade. I remember the excitement when he was given a company car. It even had a cassette player! Mum used to work in the evenings at the US Air Force Base at Lakenheath. Dad would get home at 5.30 p.m., and she would leave at 6 p.m. It meant she was able to take us to and from school and be around during the school holidays, while she and Dad earned enough to keep us ticking over. They made huge sacrifices.

It all created a platform for me and Matty, and we ran around on it for all we were worth. Spirits were always high; mud, tears and injuries never far away. Feltwell was a small community, but we threw ourselves into it. Dad ran the local youth club; Mum helped out at the local playgroup. Our house was a constant hub of activity, with people coming and going. There were regular parties. The family barbecues were legendary. The snapshots I carry in my head of those times are idyllic – picnics, cycling down country lanes, Dad's bedtime stories (including the one about Mr Mole, who went out one morning and couldn't find his home when he returned because all these other molehills had sprung up in the meantime), the fancy-dress outfits that Mum made us for the Feltwell Fête each year, family holidays, Christmases at my aunt and uncle's with my cousins, Rob and Tim. And then there were the tears. I vividly recall the time I slipped on a friend's climbing frame and bit my tongue so deeply it was hanging off. There was blood everywhere. Not quite so idyllic, but all part of the tapestry. I was a ridiculously accident-prone child (and adult). Hence that nickname, courtesy of my cousin and one of my best friends, Tim.

It was a very stable upbringing that I enjoyed, rich and varied. I think my driven nature, or at least the young instinct it would develop from, was great for me as a child. I knew only that the world was full of so many wonderful things and that I must embrace as many of them as possible. It didn't matter what the pursuit – studies, art, sport, drama – I just had to be at the centre of it.

My brother, who is three years younger than me, is also driven, but not so obsessively. Growing up, ours was the classic sibling relationship, full of love and laughter, and littered with the obligatory fights. It's not clear where I get my obsessive nature from, or my fieriness. My mother used to be pretty feisty; my father was the mellow one.

Either way, this relentless determination to make the most of

myself is something I was probably born with. It is also the 'brave face' syndrome, always wanting to appear strong and successful and, just as importantly, not wanting to show any weakness, for fear of people judging me negatively. I cannot remember a time when I haven't been compelled by it.

I was particularly driven at school. My first was Edmund de Moundeford Primary School, just around the corner from our house, where I was particularly inspired by the headmaster, the late Mr Feltwell. (That he and the village shared the same name was a coincidence.) From there through secondary school to university, I was focused and disciplined, with one goal in mind – to be the best in my class. My capacity for hard work knew no bounds.

Not that I'd want you to think I was a dull girl! All work and no play was definitely not my style. It was more like all work and all play. I suppose we might see in it the seeds of my aptitude for endurance sport – everything was a hundred miles an hour, and it was non-stop. Sometimes I was restless even when asleep. I used to sleepwalk as a child. I once walked into my brother's room and gave him a pillow, and on a few occasions I tried to get out of the house. But there were also moments of calm. I used to take myself off, for example, to paint the old church out at the back of our house. The impulse may have been to add another activity to my campaign of self-improvement (my grandfather Harry was very artistic), but I did also enjoy the chance to be on my own and to reflect. As long as I was doing something, I was happy.

Never was I happier than when playing sport. School was for achievement; sport was for recreation. It started off with swimming. I was dangled in water for the first time at three weeks old, and thereafter was taken every week. I never showed any signs of fear, and by the age of three I could swim. I had my first tricycle at around the same time. At primary school further sports were introduced – rounders, netball, cross-country, high jump and long jump. The egg-

and-spoon race, obviously. The school sports day was a huge event. I never shied away from racing. I loved the competition, but it was the social side of things that really appealed, the chance to spend time with friends in a loosely structured setting, to compete without the same pressure I seemed to put myself under in the classroom.

I learned to swim at Thetford swimming pool, and at the age of six earned my certificate for swimming a mile (still got it – I keep everything). The adjoining leisure centre hosted a gymnastics class, which I started to attend with a few of my friends from Feltwell. I was appalling. In my blue-and-pink leotard and with my hair in bunches, I had the balance and coordination of a baby giraffe. Far more appealing were the activities of the swimming club, the Thetford Dolphins, next door in that special pool where I'd learned to swim. My nose was practically pressed up against the window, looking in. I begged my parents to let me join, and at the age of eight I was a fully fledged Dolphin. So began one of the most important associations of my early life.

We trained three evenings a week, and at 7.30 a.m. on a Saturday morning. Then, every Saturday evening, there were the galas. It formed the hub of my social life, and soon became a big part of my parents' social life, too. My mum took an exam in judging and timekeeping so she could help out.

I loved it. I was able to give vent to all the normal childhood mischief I denied myself in the classroom – the luxury of being naughty, the thrill of being sent out (usually with Michaela Wilson) for talking too much! It meant my bond with the place and with my friends in it was really strong.

It didn't really bother me when I didn't win. I was good – I think I still hold one of the club records – but I wasn't the best. I won my fair share of races, but Julie Williams usually edged me, and I never threatened to beat the best boys. What did I care? This was more about being with my friends, meeting boys and prancing up and down the side of the pool in my swimwear. It was also about travelling

to galas, even beyond the market towns of East Anglia. Thetford is twinned with Hürth in Germany and Spijkenisse in the Netherlands, and each year one of us would take a turn to host the other two. One year we would have German or Dutch swimmers staying at our house, the next we would pile onto a coach and catch the ferry to Europe. For a young teenager this was amazing, a huge highlight. We would be put up by a family, go on daytrips, experience a new country, new food . . . oh, and do a bit of swimming.

Despite my lack of application, I did show some potential in the pool. On the advice of my swim coach, my parents sat me down when I was fifteen and asked me if I wanted to join the Norwich Penguins. This represented a step up in class from the Thetford Dolphins. Knowing how ambitious I was in other pursuits they said they would drive me to Norwich, which was an hour away, if I wanted to take my swimming further. I said no. I felt it would detract from my studies and, besides, I was happy at our small club with my special network of friends.

Everyone is equal in the water. With our swimsuits, goggles and caps on, there wasn't much scope for expressing how cool we were. My swimming friends and I had all grown up together, and together we took on those early awkward teenage years. I was in my element, totally comfortable in an environment with no front to it.

Secondary school, though, was different. I chose Downham Market High School over the more local Methwold. It was a forty-five-minute bus ride away, but it enjoyed a better reputation at the time for academia and sport. It took me much longer to find my place there. I enjoyed my time at school, but I derived a lot of that enjoyment from working hard and achieving good grades. In my first and second years in particular, I just wasn't one of the in-crowd. I was a naive eleven-year-old when I arrived, sensible, studious and not very trendy. I didn't want to have to dry my hair after swimming, so I wore my hair short,

like a boy's. Some of the other girls seemed impossibly cool. They were having sex – one even became pregnant, aged eleven. They were getting periods and growing breasts; their skirts were so short you could practically see their knickers; they wore loafers. I, on the other hand, was a late developer. With my flat chest, short hair, sensible skirt and heavy shoes, I suddenly became aware of the way I looked – and I didn't like it. For the first time in my life, I felt alienated. I was getting my first taste of the world as an unaccommodating place, and it bothered me. I am a sensitive soul, and I've always wanted to be liked.

Those first two years at school were awkward in that respect, but I've never been one to sit around feeling sorry for myself, so in time, I did something about it. One of the first measures I took was to grow my hair into a big curly mane. It took an age to style each morning. Sometimes it wouldn't sit in the particular way I wanted it to, and I would throw a tantrum at my poor mum. That control thing again.

Another example of my obsession with control was my attitude towards smoking. To me, every person who smoked was voluntarily killing themselves, and doing it quite openly. My greatest fear was that my parents would take it up. The knowledge that I wouldn't be able to stop them tore at me. So I loathed the habit from an early age. I was terrified, too, of becoming a drug addict, and my attitude towards alcohol was unforgiving. I didn't drink until I was twenty, and I hated it when my dad got drunk. Not that he did to any significant degree, but the mere possibility of a loss of control alarmed me.

By the age of thirteen or fourteen, I had found my feet at school. I was never totally in my element, as I was at the swimming club, but I made a couple of new friends in the third year and started to dress a bit more fashionably. Boys began to notice me. Sport also helped, to a degree. I played hockey and netball for the school. We were a successful netball team, becoming county champions. The team

comprised the in-crowd, so I had a foot in the trendy camp, but I was still not one of them. I remember being the victim of teasing on the way back from one tournament.

Being a part of that set would have been nice, but it was nowhere near as important to me as excelling in my studies. Thankfully, the hard work paid off. My lower-school career ended with straight As at GCSE. It stunned me at the time. Straight As was something that happened to other people. Not to me. When it happened, I was overjoyed. I had my first taste of defying what I had thought possible. It endorsed my policy of working flat out to make the most of myself, so I cranked that up even further for my A-levels.

Needless to say, that didn't open any doors into the trendy club. In the sixth form I suffered hostility from one boy in particular. To this day I don't know what I did to upset him. We were in our mid-teens, so the merry-go-round of boys and girls was well under way. Even I had shed enough of my naivety to have developed an appetite for the opposite sex. I used to work it in my funky little crop tops on a Friday night down at Rollerbury, the roller-skating rink in Bury St Edmunds. I'd had my first kiss at fourteen (Gareth Whisson at the Thetford Dolphins Christmas disco), and from then on the usual awkward fumblings took place on a reasonably regular basis at Rollerbury and beyond. So it's possible I once kissed the wrong person, or something, but I'm not convinced that would explain what happened next.

One day I walked into the common room at school, and there, scrawled on the wall in angry letters were the words, 'Christine Wellington is a slag'. I was devastated. Even now as I think about it, I can feel the hot flush that surged through me then, of embarrassment and anger. I've got a pretty good idea who it was. Why he did it I have no idea. Of course, such stunts reveal far more about the people who perpetrate them than they reveal about the victims, which is precisely nothing. Still, the hostility of it caught me

unawares. That someone should feel so ill of me that he be moved to write it up like that for all to see.

I'm not the sort of person to rise to that sort of thing. On those occasions in my life when I have encountered hostility like that, I have tended to internalise it and to withdraw into myself. It doesn't happen very often, but this was the most damaging instance, because it changed me for a while.

I was going out with my first boyfriend at the time, Matty Knight. He was in the year below and a lovely, gentle-hearted soul. Over the next year or so I did something that was very unlike me. I fell into a low-key, introverted existence with him. The sixth form became a subdued phase of my life, dominated by A-levels (biology, geography and English), babysitting and hanging out with Matty.

This was when concerns about my body image really started to kick in. It was the early 1990s, and we were being bombarded with images of waiflike supermodels. *Just 17* was my girly magazine of choice at the time, and you couldn't turn a page without Kate Moss or some other delicate sprite teasing you with her perfection. The yearning to look like these apparent goddesses was strong, and came with the equally compelling terror of ever turning fat. I was lucky in that I had never been one to put on weight. I have always adored food of every kind. It took me a while to come to terms with baked beans, but I love them now, which means there is no food left that I would not happily devour. In those days, I used to eat pizza and chips by the bucketload after swimming and when we stopped on the way back from netball tournaments. I never seemed to pile on the pounds.

But the nagging fear remained that one day I might. Coupled with my lust for control, it made me fertile ground for an eating disorder. I had a friend at the time who told me once that she had been experimenting with bulimia. When she explained it to me, it planted a seed in my mind. It sounded pretty disgusting, but here was a way

of controlling what you could and couldn't eat. If ever I felt a pang of guilt over something I had eaten, which was beginning to happen more and more as I reached the age of seventeen, all I had to do was to bring it up again. I tried to think of a downside.

The first time you make yourself sick, you imagine that through this you can have the best of both worlds. No longer do you have to watch how many chocolate bars you eat, or even feel guilty when you do. But the more you make yourself sick, the more it takes its toll. It sounded pretty disgusting because it was. I spent more moments over the following few years than I would care to count doubled up over a toilet bowl, trying to spit the cloying bile and acid from my mouth before it rotted my teeth. My throat would grow hoarse and sore. I quickly realised that I shouldn't be doing it, that it was an unnatural thing to do, but I persevered because it satisfied my craving for control.

It was a secret. Only my friend knew. Matty would have been horrified, I think. It made no sense. I had a boyfriend I cared about who loved me as I was, but, perversely, that made me even more concerned about keeping a certain kind of figure. He would never have put any pressure on me over the shape of my body. It was all down to the pressure I put on myself. I wasn't happy about it and I did it despite myself, but there has always been that little voice in my head urging me on to some notion of perfection, urging me to retain control over myself.

It was the same impulse that drove me on at school and that drives me on now as a triathlete. I have to give it everything, to do the best I can. In this case it started out both as a desire to look like Kate Moss and as a fear of becoming fat, the carrot and stick, which are one and the same. Being so competitive and so sensitive to the views of others, I was bound to internalise the images we were being bombarded with. I have always been my own worst critic. People might say to me, 'You've got an amazing figure,' but I would strive for more. Soon you lose sight of the original object of the exercise – to achieve and maintain a certain look.

Bulimia never worked in that sense, anyway. First, I wasn't very good at it. Sometimes I would fail to bring anything up, and a crashing sense of disappointment would come over me. Second, the theory of it is flawed – once you've eaten something, you don't just magic it out of your system by throwing it up. I never lost any weight as a result. Yet I continued with it, off and on, until well into my time at university. It didn't matter that it wasn't working. It was the illusion of control that had me.

My social life in the sixth form suffered from a combination of the writing on the wall, and the importance I attached to my studies and my relationship with Matty. I did go out. De Niro's nightclub in Newmarket was a regular haunt on Friday or Saturday nights, but I didn't drink and so I was the designated driver. I was, and still am, an appalling driver. My accident-prone nature extended to that as well. The very day I passed my test I went round to Matty's house in Mum's car. I drove into a ditch. Hadn't quite worked out how the headlights worked. A bit later I wrote off Mum's car altogether by driving into a butcher's van.

I left school with three As at A-level and an A* (they had just introduced the star system) for the geology GCSE I had taken as an extra subject. I'd applied to Oxford, but they put me in St Hilda's, an all girls' college, and I knew even before the interview that I didn't want to go there. I walked in and this woman with glasses on the end of her nose asked, 'Christine, what is science?' I wasn't very good at thinking on my feet back then. Everything I had achieved had been through hard graft; I was uncomfortable having questions fired at me that I couldn't prepare for.

They didn't accept me, but I can't say I was disappointed about not going. The rejection certainly hurt, though. Other than the first time I tried to qualify as a lifeguard at Bury St Edmunds pool when I was sixteen, I had never failed anything.

My dad drove me to all the universities I'd applied to, and I chose Birmingham. We used to go on canal holidays as a family – Dad is passionate about them – and I remember one that took us through Birmingham when I was fourteen or fifteen. The canal goes right through the university grounds, and my mum and I were walking along the towpath at one point. Through the trees I could see this beautiful courtyard of red-brick buildings, dominated by a huge clock tower, which turned out to be 'Old Joe', the tallest free-standing clock tower in the world.

'That looks amazing,' I said to Mum.

Dad told me it was the campus of Birmingham University.

'I want to go there one day,' I said.

When the day came, my dad dropped me off. Neither of my parents had been to university, so this was a poignant watershed for me and, in a strange way, for my family. I will always remember my dad's parting advice: 'Just seize every opportunity you have, embrace every experience. Make a mark, for all the right reasons.'

I threw myself into it from the start, and I thrived. I was a rare example of an eighteen year old who didn't drink, but you would never have known it if you hadn't watched carefully. University was a chance to snap out of the lull that I had fallen into over the past year or so. I was at the forefront of all the usual student antics. Wednesday night was Sports Night at the student union. Having joined the swimming club, it was one of the highlights of my week. I may not have been drunk like everyone else, but it's amazing how high you can get on those other types of spirit – exuberance, joy and a love of friendship. And lashings of Red Bull and Coke.

As ever, studies took precedence over everything else. My geography degree inspired and enthralled me in equal measure. I was privileged to be placed in a tutor group led by the wonderful Dr Jon Sadler, who remains a friend to this day. The biogeography of small invertebrates was his bag. Mine was economic geography, so

there was not much of an overlap there, but he proved a wonderful support and sounding board. I was on a mission, and he provided me with all the encouragement I needed. The dash between lecture theatre and library was one of my chief sporting endeavours at university. As soon as the lecturer had said his bit I was out of there, straight to the library to be the first to check out the journals and photocopy the articles. I was quite selfish in that regard – not that there was ever much competition to be the first to lay hands on the relevant edition of the *Journal of Economic Geography*. As always, the competition came from within. Something inside me was constantly driving and driving and driving. I had to make the most of it; I had to make the most of me. There could be no slack, anywhere, not in my time, not in my head, not across my skin. If there were any, the guilt wouldn't bear thinking about.

The policy of making the most of things applied just as much to socialising. After that subdued period in the sixth form, the sparkle was back. I found a great network of friends in Birmingham. My relationship with Matty didn't last very long into my time there. We intended to keep it going, but deep down I think I knew that it wasn't going to last. This was a new adventure. I wanted to make a clean break, I wanted to fly. Even my name was up for reinvention. Until that point, I had always been known as Chris or Christine. At university I decided that I would introduce myself as Chrissie. I wanted it to be the start of a new me, or at least the rediscovery of an old one. I have been Chrissie ever since.

I joined the university swimming team, more for the social side than any sporting ambitions. It was the one area where I let myself off the hook in terms of pressure. With the rest of my life stretched to capacity, the swimming team formed a vital outlet for recreation and socialising, rather than achievement. I swam twice a week and then played a full part in the usual student japes – blow-up sheep, traffic cones, that kind of thing – despite, for the first year at any rate,

remaining sober. I don't know what it says about me that I could have been one of the leading protagonists without the excuse of inebriation! We used to play 'drinking golf' round the pubs of Edgbaston, where you drink your pint in as few gulps as possible. I drank Coke. Nobody seemed to mind, and after a few 'holes' I was as crazy as the rest of them.

By Christmas, I had a new boyfriend, James Alback. He was charismatic, lively and enthusiastic. There was no danger of retreating into a shell with him around. Our relationship was to last for two years, and there was never a dull moment. We argued ferociously on occasion. Our political views were opposed, and he was very into his clothes and his labels. At the end of our first summer holiday, we went on a ramshackle old tour bus across America from Boston. It was a spectacular two weeks, but James, or Jay as we knew him, wasn't so keen on slumming it. For me, spending the night under the stars in a sleeping bag was a magical experience; Jay was more bothered about keeping the dirt off his Ralph Lauren shirts! He couldn't wait to get to San Francisco and a proper shower. Differences aside, though, he represented the kind of spirit I was hoping to embrace. I hadn't liked the introverted person I had become. I wanted to exude energy and confidence, to be the kind of person to light up a room when I walked into it. You can never know whether you're managing that, but you do know when you're not – and I hadn't been.

My policy was to embrace everything. I wrote for the student paper, *Redbrick*, on current affairs in and around the university. I was selected for the university council. I was the geography representative to the board. I became captain of the swimming team.

And I became chair of BUNAC, the British Universities North America Club. Through BUNAC I spent most of my first two summer holidays teaching swimming at Beaver Country Day School in a suburb of Boston. They were wonderful times in a wonderful city. I adored teaching the kids and watching them overcome their fear of the water.

At weekends we went to Cape Cod or to watch the Red Sox. I made some great friends. As the only foreigner, I was like a kind of mascot to them. They loved my British accent and were fascinated by my experimentation with sit-ups, which my friend Gabriel and I used to indulge in at the poolside. I was known as Chrissie Abs of Steel.

When you're in America, it's virtually impossible to avoid those local specialities – Fourth of July cakes with thick frosting, bagels, jelly, peanut butter – and I didn't. I was still making myself sick, but it had long been clear to me that that tactic did not work. If I wanted to look good in my swimwear, I needed more, and it was sit-ups that satisfied my lust for self-improvement in Boston. Gabriel was the perfect training partner. She was a co-teacher on that camp. Beneath the laughter and socialising I think we both recognised in each other, even in that first year, a preoccupation with body image. She became a great friend, and is to this day.

Things started to change in my second year at university. First of all, I finally embraced alcohol. I had never found it difficult to resist. Not drinking had made me feel good about myself. I felt healthy and in control. But, of course, at that age, wherever you are, but particularly when you're at university, you are constantly surrounded by the stuff, and I was intrigued. I just wanted to try it. I literally never had.

I don't remember when I started, or what my first alcoholic drink was. I suspect it was vodka with a fruit-juice mixer at Old Joe's, the bar on campus. I liked it. Before long, I was swigging Malibu from a bottle at Frenzy on a Friday night, or buying a bottle of Lambrini with the girls for £1.99 from the local corner shop. I used to go to Cocksoc (the less than salubrious cocktail night at a local club), where for a £5 entry fee you could drink as much as you wanted from dustbins filled with cocktails.

What alcohol did for me, of course, was to make me even more outgoing than I already was. My friends were surprised when I

suddenly started drinking. My parents couldn't believe it. We drank quite a lot. Very occasionally I lost control, which terrified me. Early on, I got too drunk on wine and was sick everywhere, but on the whole I knew when to stop.

Compared to that other type of vomiting that had been a feature of my life, it was nothing. The friend from home who had first told me about bulimia was now at university herself. She had come across an article on eating disorders as part of her degree. She knew I was still bulimic and she was concerned, so she sent me the article. In it she had underlined key sentences, warning of the short- and long-term effects – insomnia, psychological problems, digestive problems, dental, cardiac, dermatological and hormonal problems. It was a full-on illness. I was shaken by that, but also strangely reassured to know that it was a recognised condition that so many others suffered from. It raised big questions. In the same way as her own experimentation had first sown the seed in my mind, now my friend's concern was bringing about the beginning of the end.

But it was the second summer in Boston that proved the watershed for my bulimia. Gabriel and I came clean to each other over our obsessions and concerns about body image. I have no doubt that such conditions are so much more widespread than any of those sufferers realise, as they fight their own private battles. The truth is, you only really feel able to talk about it after you have been through it, never while it is actually happening. I have talked to so many friends since who have revealed that they suffered from the same thing.

That summer of 1997, Gabriel and I had some very open and frank discussions about the pressures we were feeling, about the tyranny of body image. Talking to somebody about it proved a great relief, and gave me the confidence to find other ways of tackling my obsession. Thanks to the article my friend had sent me, I was now far less bulimic anyway, but in America I was eating more than I should, or at least more than I thought I should. This precipitated my going

for a few runs in Boston. At the swimming pool, I was soon back into the sit-ups. The desire to make the most of my body was still driving me, but at least it was in healthier directions for now. It struck me suddenly and quite forcefully that bulimia was not only irrational and dangerous, it was also disgusting. The sore throats were debilitating, and my teeth were not benefiting at all.

In my third year at university there was no bulimia. The rational side of me took over, as I realised what damage I was doing to myself. I started to put on a bit of weight, but most of all, emotionally I felt a huge weight lift. I was no longer constrained by this mental chokehold.

Pressure is a necessary evil if you want to achieve. It brings with it great stress, but you deal with it, and the redemption comes when you achieve things as a result. It can also be debilitating though, on a day-to-day level, especially if its benefits are illusory. The trick is to understand which pressures are necessary and which ones are the dangerous decoys, the ones that suck the life out of you for no reward. In ridding myself of bulimia, I had identified one of those and cut it out. I wish I could say that I had beaten the emotional urge to push my body to extremes in search of some self-devised notion of perfection. That was to lie dormant for the time being. But, physically, I had beaten bulimia.

The alleviation of the mental pressure was similar to when Brett Sutton started to coach me as a triathlete, nearly ten years later. He lobbied me incessantly to stop thinking and just to follow his orders without question, to trust that he knew what was best and to channel all my energies into the programme he had devised. Surrendering control like that was incredibly difficult for me to do, but when I did let go it felt the same way – like a weight being lifted.

Mentally it is hard coping with the weight of expectation I put on myself. Mentally it is hard trying to be the best the whole time. And I don't know who I'm trying to prove myself to. There is something

inside me – not a voice exactly, but a deep-seated compulsion – that strives for perfection. But it's my own version of perfection, not to be perfect per se but just to be the best that I can be. That can lead to unnatural and excessive pressure. Sometimes I have difficulty being in the now, being present. I constantly worry, am I making the most out of this, am I making the most out of this, instead of just accepting and enjoying what *is*.

It does, though, make the pride and euphoria all the more intense when you do achieve something special. For me, that achievement came in the shape of a first-class degree in geography. I achieved the highest grade ever recorded in the department, and was awarded the title of University Scholar, 1998. My dissertation was published in a journal. When my family came to the graduation ceremony, I felt confident that I had followed my father's advice to make the most of every opportunity. With so many good friends graduating the same day, it was a very special occasion.

But the passing-out ceremony that stands out in my mind was the girls' trip to Magaluf that I went on that summer with three of my best friends from university. It was the apotheosis of my fledgling drinking career, and remains so to this day. Certainly, it bore precious little resemblance to the life I lead now, or indeed did then, even after I had embraced drinking as a pastime. My friend Emily broke her leg on the first night going up the steps to a nightclub, and spent the rest of the week in plaster. Not that it stopped her, or the rest of us. It was a week of the purest debauchery – drinking, sunbathing, drinking, meeting boys, drinking and drinking. Self-control was abandoned for the week, and I have to say it felt good. I had just achieved more than I could ever have imagined at university, so I had earned this time off the leash. I think of that week with a special fondness, maybe because I have never, before or since, just let myself go in such a gratuitous fashion. I did enjoy it, but it could never have lasted.