

CHAPTER ONE

MY STORY

WHY IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

It was the most exhilarating moment of my life. 24th Sept 2023 in Pontevedra, Spain, in the Triathlon World Championships. I heard the announcer say: “Crossing the line, we have Hilary Briggs – taking 2nd place in her Age Group.”

Yes! Silver medal!

Now some of you might be wondering – what, not gold? Was it an Ironman? Are you the only woman that's done it?

I'll be totally upfront: Yes, I finished 2nd. It was a standard distance triathlon, meaning 1500m swim, 40k bike and 10k run. There were 39 of us on the start list in my Age Group, so no – not unique I'm afraid...

However, here's some food for thought: I was just shy of my 62nd birthday, had done my first triathlon only 7 years before,

having never done any competitive sport, and I had a massive Achilles injury en route which threatened my ability to walk properly...

I laugh when I recall that first triathlon at Eastbourne in 2016. I had truly lofty goals: “finish but don’t be last!” A picture from the event shows me as a bedraggled low-grade amateur competitor trudging along the sea front in torrential rain towards the finish... I did finish, and I wasn’t last! And I learned a lot from it, primarily that I needed to do much more work on my swim.

I’m writing this book to prove you don’t have to be a superhero to do this. However, that means there are no excuses. Each one of you can improve some aspect of yourself beyond your expectations, if you want to - it’s never too late.

I’m gobsmacked that I did it, and that I am still improving now at age 64. I’m curious about how I’ve managed to do it, and wanting to share that has led to this book and the talks that I do.

But what are the underlying patterns I’ve built up during my life?

I have been drawn to improvement and challenges from day one. I was born one month prematurely and have been impatient and pushing for improvements ever since! I don’t claim that’s always a good thing!

I also seem to have had an independent streak from early on: my Mum described how she'd seen me playing happily on the dining room floor (around age 3) one afternoon. As the light started to fade, I realised I needed light, got up and reached for the light switch. Alas, it was beyond my reach. Instead of screaming for help, I looked around, grabbed a chair to climb on, successfully reached and flicked on the switch, and then resumed playing...

Having an older brother also meant I got into challenges beyond my comfort zone, whether go-karting, scrambling on rocks or trying to keep up on walks.

My parents were keen on walking and music as pastimes so I was introduced to both early on. Not that I was always that enthusiastic about going out for a walk, or practising the piano!

We lived in Austria for three years during my early childhood as my Dad had a posting to Vienna. We'd go out for walks regularly (though I still wasn't always that keen) and I realised later that they'd given me the habit and understanding that I could survive a bit of discomfort or poor weather and would actually feel better afterwards.

I recall one all-day walk in the mountains with friends of the family when I must have been around age seven. I was so tired at the end, I fell asleep on my bed fully clothed. Exhausted, yes; however, I'd got a massive sense of satisfaction at having completed the walk.

Back in the UK and now at secondary school, I got a chance invite from a friend to an informal orienteering event. I really loved the navigation aspects, and the pair of us did well – we won! My interest led to getting a book about orienteering, getting a proper compass and starting to practise the skills. These all gave me a great foundation for the expedition part of the Duke of Edinburgh Award, which I am very grateful that my school offered. In turn, that provided a great platform to start learning to plan expeditions as well.

At school I was interested in science, which ultimately led me to study Engineering at the University of Cambridge. Only around 10% of the intake was female (higher than on many engineering courses at the time), and this was significantly higher than out in the world beyond university. I found myself the only female applicant at more than one graduate recruitment and selection event... So I jumped into the challenge of working in the very male-dominated space of the car industry. However, I found there were benefits of being relatively rare - you were more likely to be noticed. With the arrival of Sir Graham Day as Chairman of what became Rover Group, I soon found myself in Production Management as he was looking for people with different backgrounds who could help change the ways things had typically been done. It was a sink-or-swim environment!

The experiences I had during over three years in various roles in Production were at the extreme end of challenging, and led to some key strategies I'll share later in Chapter 5, such as “5

minutes a day”, excuse management, and how to cut through overwhelm.

They all helped prepare me, as much as anything could, for the most dramatic situation I’ve ever had to deal with - a major factory fire when I was Managing Director of a car component business in Germany in November 1998. Thankfully, no one was injured; it had broken out on a Sunday afternoon. When I arrived at the plant at 10:30 pm that night, the site was a smouldering ruin. We had around 7 days to find a way to restart production one way or another - or risk the potential shutdown of 25% of the German car industry... No pressure!

The key learnings which are relevant to this book are the importance of focus, taking action with what you can do, and frequent reviews taking in expertise to work out the next steps in the face of massive uncertainties.

It’s ironic, but soon after working through the factory fire, I found myself fired.

I won’t go into the back story - the relevant points are that having achieved what I thought was a dream job with the grand title of Managing Director (the German Geschäftsführerin sounded even better), the reality was I was out. Suddenly I had no title or professional identity, yet I realised the job was actually extreme pressure all the time. This was partly due to my inexperience, but comparing notes with much more experienced guys in similar positions, I didn’t get the sense they saw it much differently. It caused me to question what I was doing,

what I wanted to do, and to reinvent myself. I recalled meeting someone at a party a few years before who'd been made redundant. Suddenly I got a sense of what they had been dealing with.

I'd had a wobble earlier in my career which had resolved itself (I got promoted and the former boss got a sideways move...) but that had taught me one important lesson: if you don't feel you have choice, your first project is to create choice. My unexpected exit gave me the chance to review, regroup, and start going again in a new direction. That process gave me insights that form the basis of Chapters 2 - 5.

I did establish a new direction in using my experience and skills to help small businesses with a mix of consulting, training, projects, and some full-time roles. That continued my experience of having to learn new things quickly on a variety of subjects, from coffee machines, wind energy through to food hygiene...

All was going well, and in 2016 a combination of things led me to have a go at triathlon. The event I mentioned earlier at Eastbourne was my first one. Over that winter, I was building up training and was planning to go from sprint to standard distance the next year. A routine cycle home from work via the supermarket was to change all that...

I'm still not totally clear what happened, but I managed to fall off my bike (no one else involved, and thankfully no traffic following me) and in the process did major damage to my right

Achilles. It wasn't the first time I'd injured it, as I'd had an injury from tennis decades before. However, in short, within 10 days, I'd had my Achilles replaced (they "harvested" one of my tendons...) and I was seriously worried I wouldn't walk properly again, let alone get back to triathlon.

I was dependent on my physio Grace - she had the expertise to take me through this period - which ended up as 18 months of rehab.

That period raised my level of discipline to new heights. I followed her exercise plans religiously! I was also able to again draw on my earlier experiences so my 5-minute approach got applied to doing exercises at bus stops or stations to squeeze in my rehab wherever I could. Bit by bit my muscles and tendons were recovering. Once I was allowed to run and cycle again, I could plan my return to triathlon. Hever Castle in September 2018 was my main return event, and the first time I'd done a standard distance. My goals were enhanced: "finish, don't be last - and most importantly - no damage!" All achieved. I was back, planned events for the following year, and treated myself to a proper road bike.

The two events I did in 2019 astonished me; I came first in my Age Group. I heard that there were Age Group teams at national level - could I possibly qualify for those? The idea seemed crazy! My times were the order of 3 hours 10 mins in those events. With a bit of research, I could see that I needed to be nearer 2 hours 40 mins or better to be competitive. Nothing like a goal to generate curiosity - how could I do that?

There's an old saying, often quoted in learning and personal development circles: "When the student is ready, the teacher appears". So it was through a combination of conversations and some research that I assembled my coaching team, and we set to work. The interruption of Covid helped, in that I had an extra year of preparation. 2021 was the first time I'd attempted qualification for both the European and World Age Group Championships. Success in both - so now a real focus for the events I'd be representing the Team GB Age Group team at in 2022.

I came away with the silver and bronze medals respectively - and heightened motivation to do even better the following year, which I did with gold and silver (that one at Pontevedra I've already mentioned).

That's when I became really astonished at what I'd been able to do - especially after the injury. Again, some random conversations spurred me on. I'd kept in contact with an expert, Dr Max Herold, who I'd met on a training course in 1999 and who had specialised in modelling excellence – how people do what they do. As we dug into my journey, I became part of his 2nd PhD in the subject. He'd worked with Olympians, academics, governmental and business experts in specific areas. I felt honoured to have been part of his work, which inspired what I now call my MAP framework: Motivation, Action, Progress.

As the framework became clearer, I also realised I had been applying the principles to other activities, including public speaking. That also gave me the opportunity to apply it more

consciously to other areas such as winning a speech contest, doing a TEDx talk and writing this book!

And this is the real crux: the question sequence in my head was, if I can do that (the triathlon transformation), what else could I do, and how could I help others to do amazing things beyond their expectations?

The MAP framework allowed me to crystallise a process that you can follow to improve and be really good at whatever you want and is important to you. Change is not magic. It is a process.

Once you understand your own version of that process, you can apply it to the challenges and opportunities in front of you. So before we get into MAP itself, we need to start where every real journey starts: with where you are now.

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