

Author's Note

This book is a journey—a chronicle of unexpected paths, remarkable people, and the transformative partnership with Mo Farah that changed both our lives. It's about how a self-proclaimed running hater found himself not only in the midst of elite athletes but also contributing to their successes, most notably with Mo. Through humor, humility, and a fair share of mishaps, I hope to share insights into the world of high-performance sport and the unique bond that forms when two people pursue excellence together.

From our first, seemingly ordinary meeting to the electrifying moments on the world's biggest stages, Mo and I navigated the twists and turns of the athletic world—learning, growing, and often laughing along the way. This book captures that shared journey, highlighting not just the victories but the lessons learned, the challenges overcome, and the friendship forged.

For those interested in delving deeper into the technical aspects of training and performance, I'm excited to announce that a second book focusing on the methodologies and principles that underpin elite athletic preparation will be coming soon. It will explore the strategies and practices that helped athletes like Mo reach the pinnacle of their sport.

I invite you to join me on this adventure, to experience the highs and lows, and perhaps discover that sometimes the most extraordinary stories begin with an

Chapter 1: An Education in Winning

"Difficulties strengthen the mind, as labor does the body." - Seneca

Competing in the Olympics in endurance running is, arguably, the ultimate expression of human pursuit—though personally, I'd argue it's right up there with trying to assemble flat-pack furniture without swearing. Running isn't just a sport; it's what we were born to do. Our ancient ancestors didn't have Uber Eats; they had to jog after their dinner in the heat of the day, armed with nothing but persistence and perhaps a pointy stick. The best hunters caught their meals and, as a bonus, passed on their superior genetics. The less successful ones, well, they became footnotes in evolutionary history. So, it's not nearly enough to just compete; one must win. Winning is all there is.

Eldoret, Kenya, May 2005

I found myself standing on a dirt track at Chepkoilel University, squinting under the unforgiving sun and wondering how on earth I'd ended up here. Surrounding me were some of the finest endurance runners on the planet, men who would etch their names in the annals of distance running history. There was Eliud Kipchoge, the world 5000m champion from Paris 2003, where he'd

outkicked the legendary Hicham El Guerrouj and Kenenisa Bekele in a race for the ages. A victory decided by a mere 0.04 seconds, the closest ever in World Championship history, it cemented Kipchoge's place among the all-time greats. He'd go on to conquer the marathon, becoming a two-time Olympic champion and the first man to break the 2-hour barrier. And then there was Brimin Kipruto, fresh off his silver medal in the 3000m steeplechase at the Athens Olympics, a rising star with an Olympic gold in his future. These were the men pushing themselves to the limit that day, led by the now legendary coach Patrick Sang.

These athletes had already been up at 6 a.m., running through the forest at 2,500 meters above sea level—a height at which breathing feels like sipping air through a cocktail straw. Before piling into a minibus for the 30-minute trip to Eldoret, they'd fueled up on chapati and Kenyan tea. Now, Kenyan tea isn't your typical Earl Grey. It's a concoction of boiled milk, an alarming amount of sugar (up to ten teaspoons per cup!), and tea leaves. Sometimes they add water if milk is scarce, resulting in a brew that's sweeter than a candy floss sandwich. Much too sweet for my palate, but later analysis would reveal it to be as effective as any sports drink on the market—a perfect balance of sugars and proteins to fuel their training.

By 10 a.m., the sun was flexing its muscles, and the day was heating up. The runners, having slept on concrete

floors in freezing temperatures—thanks to the high altitude—were now pushing their bodies to the limit. These athletes weren't pampered professionals with sponsorship deals and cushy training facilities. They were here by choice, paying their own way, and living in conditions that made my university dorm room seem like the Ritz-Carlton. Luxury was nonexistent. This was more Rocky Balboa in a Siberian log cabin than a high-tech sports camp.

Their motto? “Train hard—win easy.” A phrase they seemed to internalize with each stride, like a mantra echoing silently in the thin air. Watching them hit 58 seconds per lap, again and again, was both awe-inspiring and slightly nauseating. To put that in perspective, they were running at a pace of 2 minutes and 25 seconds per kilometer—or about 25 kilometers per hour. The air was thick with the scent of red dust and sweat, and you could hear their breathing from the other side of the track, a rhythmic gasping as they tried to extract every molecule of oxygen from the scant atmosphere.

A Spartan Mentality

Watching the athletes grind through their sessions, I couldn't help but think of another group who epitomized the marriage of environment and mindset: the Spartans. In ancient Greece, boys were taken from their families at the age of seven and enrolled in the agoge, a brutal

education and training system designed to create the ultimate warriors.

In the agoge, nothing was left to chance. The boys were trained in physical combat, endurance, and survival. They were deliberately underfed to learn how to forage and toughen themselves against hunger. They slept on reed mats and wore the same clothing year-round, regardless of weather. This harsh environment wasn't cruelty for its own sake—it was a calculated effort to forge discipline, resilience, and an unwavering belief in their ability to endure any hardship.

One famous story tells of a Spartan boy who, after stealing a fox for food, hid it under his cloak when caught. Rather than reveal his theft, he allowed the fox to gnaw through his stomach, dying rather than admit failure. The lesson? Strength of mind was as important as strength of body.

The athletes at Chepkoilel weren't Spartans, but they shared the same principles. Their conditions weren't comfortable, but they were deliberate. Hardship wasn't an obstacle—it was part of the process. Every blistered foot, every gasping breath in the thin air, every night on a hard floor was a step closer to being unbeatable on the track. Like the Spartans, they didn't just train their bodies—they trained their minds to endure.

Patrick divided them into two groups: the seasoned elites and the up-and-coming hopefuls. They moved like a well-oiled machine, each runner taking a turn at the

front to share the load, like cyclists in a peloton. One by one, runners began to drop off, until only the best of the best remained—a distillation of raw talent and sheer willpower.

And there I was, a rugby-playing Scotsman with the aerobic capacity of a chain-smoking sloth, standing on the sidelines trying to look knowledgeable. I was about a week into a seven-week research project that was already challenging every notion I'd ever had about sport science, coaching, and human performance. Up until then, the most running I'd done was around rugby pitches—or perhaps to the pub before last call. My mate, John Nuttall, often reminded me of this with a smirk.

As I stood there, notebook in hand and a befuddled expression on my face, I realized I was way out of my depth. Sure, I had a degree and was working on a PhD, but this was the real world—a far cry from the sanitized pages of textbooks or the distant view from a couch watching the Olympics on TV.

My journey to this dusty track in Kenya began, as most great stories do, with a combination of ambition, serendipity, and sheer panic at the thought of getting a real job.

Late in 2003, I found myself sitting in Dr. Yannis Pitsiladis's office at the University of Glasgow. Yannis was a whirlwind of a man, a professor with a penchant for grand projects and a knack for making you feel both inspired and slightly terrified. He'd asked me to meet

during that nebulous time between Christmas and New Year's—a period typically reserved for leftover turkey sandwiches and questioning life choices. I suspected it was a test to see if I'd actually show up, given that most students were likely still in a festive stupor.

The meeting was a wake-up call. Yannis told me bluntly that I wasn't yet PhD material. I'd barely scraped through my third year, and as he put it, “only the best get PhD scholarships.” His challenge was simple: achieve a first-class honors degree, be among the top students, and then maybe—just maybe—there'd be a place for me.

I left his office with a mix of determination and mild indigestion. Up until that point, university life had been a pleasant blend of lectures, pints at the pub, and the occasional late-night kebab. But with graduation looming and the real world threatening on the horizon, I decided it was time to knuckle down.

I developed a study regimen that would have impressed a monk. I discovered mind maps, which appealed to my newfound understanding that I might be a visual learner after all. I wrote essays until my fingers ached, creating acronyms and mnemonic devices to recall key points during exams. My social life dwindled to conversations with the librarian and the occasional nod to the vending machine.

Come May, I sat my exams, submitted my dissertation, and waited. When the results came in, I'd done it—a first-class honors degree. I was as surprised as anyone,

perhaps even more so. I imagined Yannis raising an eyebrow, muttering a begrudging “well done,” and shuffling papers on his desk.

True to his word, he found the funding for me to pursue a PhD, albeit for only two years instead of the usual three. It was a gamble, but I figured I’d cross that bridge when I came to it. The project was fascinating: exploring the environmental factors that contribute to the success of East African runners. Genetics was being covered by someone far more qualified, so I got to focus on training, diet, altitude—all the tangible elements that might explain why these athletes were so exceptional.

And so, a year later, I was in Eldoret, Kenya, with Yannis, fellow PhD student Chris Easton, and two Kenyan PhD students, Festus and Vincent. It wasn’t my first trip to Africa. Earlier that year, we’d ventured to Nigeria to collect DNA samples from sprinters. If Kenya was a plunge into the deep end, Nigeria was like being tossed into the ocean during a hurricane.

Nigeria was a sensory overload—a cacophony of sounds, smells, and sights that no amount of guidebook reading could prepare you for. From the moment we landed in Lagos, it was clear we were far from home. Our lab technician, John Wilson—a seasoned Glaswegian with a colorful vocabulary—was visibly anxious, which was unsettling given that nothing ever seemed to faze him.

As we navigated through the airport, a swarm of eager “helpers” descended upon us, each one more insistent than the last. John’s response was to deploy a series of Glaswegian expletives that left them momentarily stunned, giving us just enough time to escape into a waiting minibus.

The journey to our hotel was punctuated by frequent stops at roadblocks manned by armed soldiers. Our driver explained that these weren’t bandits, but police and military personnel demanding bribes. Charming. We also noticed that he stopped every 15 minutes to refuel. When asked why, he casually mentioned it was to prevent carjacking. “If they take vehicle, they not go far,” he said with a shrug. Comforting.

Our hotel turned out to be a deserted compound that felt like the setting of a low-budget horror film. We were advised not to leave the premises unless we fancied being kidnapped. The culinary offerings didn’t do much to lift our spirits. Every meal was laced with enough chili to strip paint, including the scrambled eggs. By the end of the trip, my taste buds had gone into witness protection.

But amidst the chaos, there were moments of genuine warmth and hospitality. We met incredible people who, despite the hardships and corruption surrounding them, were generous and kind. The athletes we encountered were nothing short of extraordinary—physically and in spirit.

Collecting DNA samples from Nigerian sprinters was part of a larger project to understand the genetic factors contributing to athletic performance. West Africans and their descendants have dominated sprint events globally, and we were keen to explore why. The hypothesis was that the brutal history of the transatlantic slave trade had, through a horrific process of artificial selection, contributed to certain genetic traits being more prevalent. It was a sensitive and complex topic, one that required careful navigation.

Back in Kenya, things were comparatively tranquil, though not without their quirks. We were “mzungus”—white foreigners—and thus considered fair game for a bit of overcharging here and there. After Yannis and the team left me on my own with the parting words, “Don’t fuck this up,” I quickly realized that my trusted driver—a bishop, no less—had taken off with the remainder of our funds. Lesson learned: never underestimate the entrepreneurial spirit of a clergyman.

Despite these hiccups, my time in Kenya was transformative. Watching Patrick Sang’s athletes train was like witnessing a masterclass in dedication. These runners weren’t just talented; they embodied a mindset and an environment honed for success. They slept on cold floors, ate simple meals, and ran until their lungs burned—all in the pursuit of victory.

It dawned on me that success in endurance running—or any endeavor, really—isn't just about talent. It's a formula:

Outcome = Talent × Environment × Mindset

Talent is the raw material, the genetic lottery ticket you're issued at birth. In running, it's the baseline aerobic capacity that sets the ceiling for your potential. You can train until your legs fall off, but without a certain level of innate ability, there's only so far you can go.

Environment is the context in which you develop that talent. It's the training, the diet, the altitude, the people you surround yourself with. It's no coincidence that many of the world's best distance runners come from high-altitude regions where running isn't just a sport but a way of life.

Mindset is the multiplier that can amplify or diminish the first two factors. It's the day-to-day application of discipline, resilience, and passion. Without the right mindset, talent and environment can't reach their full potential.

Take Mo Farah and his twin brother, Hassan, for example. Genetically identical, yet their environments diverged when they were young. Mo grew up in the UK, exposed to structured training and opportunities in athletics. Hassan remained in Somalia, where such opportunities were scarce. The difference in their

athletic achievements underscores how crucial environment and mindset are in shaping outcomes.

Reflecting on my own journey, I realized I'd inadvertently applied this formula when I knuckled down to earn my first-class degree. I had the talent (or at least the capacity to learn), I altered my environment (less pub, more library), and I cultivated a mindset geared toward success (motivated by a fear of gainful employment, perhaps, but effective nonetheless).

For most of us who aren't elite athletes, the principles still apply. Whether it's running a 5K, excelling in a career, or mastering the art of parallel parking, success is a product of how we leverage our abilities within our environments, driven by our mindsets.

As I concluded my time in Kenya, writing up academic papers and eventually completing my PhD, I carried these lessons with me. I learned that consistency trumps intensity, that the right environment can elevate your performance, and that mindset can be the deciding factor between success and mediocrity.

Oh, and I also learned to be cautious about where I eat in Eldoret—a story involving a dodgy backstreet restaurant, questionable chicken, and a two-week relationship with Imodium. But perhaps that's a tale for another chapter.

Key Takeaways

- **Outcome = Talent × Environment × Mindset:** Success isn't just about what you have but how you use it within your surroundings, driven by your attitude.
- **Talent Is the Starting Point:** In some fields, innate ability sets the ceiling for potential achievement. Recognize your strengths and work with them.
- **Environment Shapes Potential:** Surround yourself with conditions and people that foster growth. The right environment can significantly enhance your capabilities.
- **Mindset Multiplies Everything:** Your daily attitude and approach can amplify or diminish your talent and environment. Cultivate a mindset geared toward consistent improvement.
- **Consistency Over Intensity:** Regular, sustained effort often leads to better results than sporadic bursts of activity.
- **Lifelong Learning:** Embrace experiences as opportunities to grow, even—or especially—when they push you out of your comfort zone.
- **Stay Humble and Curious:** There's always more to learn, and sometimes the best insights come from listening rather than speaking.

Final Thought

Remember, winning doesn't have to mean Olympic gold. It can be finishing your first race, landing a new job, or

finally assembling that piece of furniture without leftover screws. It's about striving to be better today than you were yesterday, one step at a time—even if, like me, you hate running.