



Lessons in Grit: What Racing & Organizing Triathlons Taught Me About **Business** & **Life**

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Breathe.



THE STARTING POINT

A Search for Challenge

The Engineer's Restlessness

- ✖ After finishing an engineering degree, there was a persistent feeling – not ambition, but a need to find out what I was truly capable of, maybe fueled by whispers that I wasn't quite measuring up.
- ✖ This led to a search for an intensely **personal challenge**.

Rediscovering the Water

- ✖ A return to swimming, years after stopping competitive swimming, began casually with a colleague at Vodafone during lunch breaks
- ✖ The same colleague asked, "Have you ever heard of triathlon?"

**"No way.
I hate running."**

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Overcoming the Excuse

Underlying Intrigue

- ✖ Despite the initial aversion to running, there was an undeniable flicker of intrigue. That multi-sport endurance challenge felt *exactly* like the demanding, personal test I realised I'd always been seeking.
- ✖ Was the running just a convenient excuse I'd allowed myself before? In that moment, feeling ready for a real challenge, I decided to **push past the old excuse and take the leap**.

Lesson Hint: Challenge Limits

Challenge self-imposed limitations and the convenient excuses we make.

What 'convenient excuse' might be holding you back?

ENTERING A NEW WORLD

Finding Guidance

Navigating the Unknown

- ✖ Showing up at the club in the early 00s - a different world with basic mobiles, dial-up, no social media - I was **enthusiastic but clueless**.
- ✖ Thankfully, an experienced racer and coach noticed and took me under his wing.

“Let’s work together so you don’t get injured straight away, and let’s channel this passion”

LESSON 1

Humility & Commitment Over Hierarchy

An Olympian's Insight

- ✖ This coach, whose brother was an Olympian, shared a key insight: In endurance sports, **there are Olympians, and then everyone else**. But the underlying drive, the human element, is similar for all who commit.
- ✖ This struck me deeply, suggesting focus less on hierarchy and more on personal commitment. Later, meeting humble Olympians confirmed this: true excellence often comes with deep respect for everyone's effort, regardless of speed.

Core Lesson & Reflection

Focus on the commitment and the shared human drive, not just the performance level.
Humility is often tied to true excellence.

How can you better recognize commitment over hierarchy in your environment?

PUSHING FURTHER

The Allure of Big Day Out

Discovering Capability

- ✖ Under guidance, I discovered unknown capabilities, started doing well, even representing my country at the World Championships.
- ✖ The discipline and pushing limits were the real draw

The Next Mountain

- ✖ While enjoying Olympic distance races, I became fascinated by the almost mythical challenge of the Ironman.
- ✖ After completing a half-Ironman (70.3), the pull towards the full distance was irresistible.
- ✖ That became **the next big mountain to climb**.



REFRAME THE DAUNTING

Reframe the Daunting

**"When you get there,
it's just a marathon."**

The Coach's Wisdom

- ✖ It sounded dismissive at first, but as hard training weeks passed, the words sank in.
- ✖ It became a central question:
How much energy do we waste worrying about the enormity of a task instead of focusing on the next step?

Core Lesson & Reflection

Perspective has the power to reframe overwhelming challenges into manageable steps. Train the mind, not just the body (or skills).

How can you break down your biggest challenge into 'just the next step'?

THE UNPLANNED BROADCAST

Unexpected Exposure

Keeping Passion Private

- ✖ I was determined to keep this intense passion separate from my professional life at Vodafone. It felt like a personal proving ground, maybe not fitting the 'engineer' box.
- ✖ A small favor for a teammate: writing about my journey for his **tiny trail running magazine** (maybe a few hundred copies). I forgot about it..

Sudden Spotlight

- ✖ Race day, Nice, France: During the bike leg, my support crew's phones blew up. Vodafone colleagues asking,
- ✖ "Is that really him?" The small article landed on a famous radio host's desk, who talked about my story live on air! My quiet challenge was suddenly public knowledge.

Lesson Hint: Embrace Serendipity

Be open to unexpected outcomes; your passions might resonate more widely and positively than you anticipate.

Where might sharing a personal passion lead unexpectedly?

A CRITICAL LOOK

Seeing the Opportunity

Positive Feedback Loop

- ✖ Back at work, the reaction wasn't judgment, but genuine curiosity and even impressiveness.
- ✖ This positive feedback started a new line of thinking: **Maybe this passion wasn't something to hide?**

Connecting the Dots

My intense experience +
Unexpected positive reaction +
State of local races = A new,
audacious thought..

What gaps exist where your
experience and observations
intersect?

THE CRAZY IDEA

Bringing Big Brands to Italy

The "What If?"

- ✖ The thought began to form: What if Italy was ready for a truly professional triathlon experience? What if we could bring a major international brand, like Ironman, here?
- ✖ The idea felt huge, maybe impossible, but it wouldn't leave me alone.



From Idea to Action

- ✖ Cautious talks with passionate club members confirmed the idea resonated. It grew from a 'what if' to a 'maybe we could'.
- ✖ But passion alone wasn't enough. **We needed structure, support, legitimacy**

SEEKING LEGITIMACY

The Crucial Meeting

“You have to be serious. You have to form a proper company.

This isn't just a hobby anymore.”

Gaining an Ally

- ✖ The President of the Italian Triathlon Federation listened intently, saw the potential and energy.
- ✖ But he was grounded in reality. **He offered mentorship and guidance** through the complex world of Italian sports politics (all linked to the Olympic committee structure), with one firm condition:

The Condition

- ✖ If we wanted his help, we had to treat it as a real business venture from day one.
- ✖ That meeting felt like standing on the edge of a much bigger commitment.

LESSON 3

Commitment Needs Structure & Execution

Crossing a line

- ✘ Taking his words to heart, we formed the company. A momentous step, crossing from passionate athletes to actual entrepreneurs.
- ✘ **The learning curve felt vertical immediately.**

Reality Check

- ✘ The dream versus the day-to-day reality of building a business was profoundly different.
- ✘ My engineering background helped analytically, but the events/sports management world operated with unfamiliar intensity (tireless hours, multiple languages, dizzying decision speed).

Core Lesson & Reflection

A vision needs structure (like forming a company) to become real. Execution is everything, demanding new skills and recognizing the gap between idea and operational reality.

What structure does your current vision need to become reality?

LESSON 4

Navigating Complexity Requires Persistence

Diving into the Maze

- ✖ Then came the practicalities: diving headfirst into Italian public administration, local politics, and stakeholder webs. It felt like walking through a complex maze or a 'house of cards'.
- ✖ Official titles didn't predict challenges; similar hurdles and human motivations existed across the board.

The Grind

- ✖ Dealing with multiple municipalities (permits, police, closures) each with its own pace and people required resilience and creative problem-solving.
- ✖ Some officials were great partners, others indifferent or overwhelmed. **You couldn't force things, but couldn't give up.**
- ✖ Endless follow-up, patience, managing absurd situations (like police complaining about a race days before it happened!).

Core Lesson & Reflection

Complex systems (like bureaucracy or large orgs) demand relentless persistence, patience, and creative problem-solving. The 'why' (passion/purpose) is essential fuel.

Where does your current complex challenge require more persistence or creative workarounds?

LESSON 5

Success Hinges on Stakeholder Empathy

Beyond the Surface

- ✖ A huge lesson during the bureaucracy phase: understanding what *truly* drives decisions. It wasn't always the stated benefits (tourism, sport).
- ✖ Often, it was about the unstated needs, political capital, or personal priorities of individuals involved.
- ✖ Success required **listening differently**, looking beyond the surface.

**What does this person,
this department, this
town really need to feel
invested in this?**

Core Lesson & Reflection

To navigate complex systems and gain buy-in, understand and address the unstated needs and motivations of key stakeholders.

Whose unstated needs could you understand better to move your project forward?

LESSON 6

Execution Demands User Obsession

**“Let's create the race
we would want to
participate in.””**

Living the product

- ✖ One thing became crystal clear: no substitute for knowing your 'product' inside out.
- ✖ We couldn't just design a course on paper; we had to live it
- ✖ This deep immersion wasn't just quality control; it was about **respect for the athletes** and their challenge

Core Lesson & Reflection

True quality execution comes from deep user/customer empathy and intimate product knowledge.
Experience it yourself

How deeply do you truly understand your user's/customer's end-to-end experience?

LEVERAGING EXPERTISE

Building the Core Team

Recognizing Limits

- ✖ The sheer scale quickly hit: I couldn't do everything, nor was I the best person for every task.
- ✖ Recognizing limitations and learning who to ask for help became critical.

Assembling the Experts

- ✖ An experienced (competitor!) race organizer willing to collaborate.
- ✖ Convinced a respected Olympic referee to be Race Director. Another enthusiastic club president joined.
- ✖ Building this core team, trusting their expertise, and communicating clearly and directly – cutting out noise, focusing on solutions – was a vital step.

Lesson Hint: Strength in Collaboration

Recognize your limits, seek complementary expertise, and foster clear, solution-focused communication.

Whose expertise could significantly help your current challenge?

LESSON 7

Lead with Empathy, Presence & Trust

The Volunteer Challenge

- ✖ Organizing relies heavily on volunteers – a unique leadership challenge (no leverage, varied skills, goodwill motivation).
- ✖ How to ensure they show up and feel valued?

Leading by Example

- ✖ Approach: **Lead by example**, show profound gratitude (best volunteer package, quality meals).
- ✖ Presence: Camped onsite during race week, visible and accessible 24/7.
- ✖ Transparency about the mission, emphasizing their crucial role (face of the org, creating athlete experience).
- ✖ Result: An astounding 'family' of ~1,500 volunteers, many with no prior experience, working incredibly hard. Some still write today.

Core Lesson & Reflection

Effective leadership, especially of volunteers or teams without direct authority, requires genuine empathy, visible presence, demonstrated gratitude, and building trust.

How can you demonstrate more empathy and build trust within your team through your actions?

LESSON 8

True Impact Lifts Others

Flexibility & The Unexpected

- ✖ Perhaps the most heartwarming lessons came from human connections. Example: A young woman in Sardinia, passionate about sports, dreamed of working for a major org. She worked tirelessly for us with infectious enthusiasm, even with uncertain pay initially.
- ✖ Grateful, we helped introduce her to RCS Sport (Giro d'Italia organizers). **She got her break, achieved her dream**.

The Unexpected Gift

- ✖ Years later, out of the blue, she sent me an original Marco Pantani cycling jersey she obtained – a gift remembering the chance we gave her, however small or messy it seemed then.



Core Lesson & Reflection

Look beyond the main goal; the most lasting impact might be on the individual lives you touch and the opportunities you help create.

Whose growth or success can you help enable, even in small ways?

THE FINISH LINE (OF SORTS)

Mission Accomplished & Moving On

Achieving the Goal

- ✖ Despite challenges, setbacks, and the grind, we achieved what we set out to do. **The big brands came to Italy**. Races were established.
- ✖ One major race today still uses a course we pioneered. Mission accomplished.



LESSON 10

Teams Forged in the Grinder

Beyond the Comfort Zone

- ✖ Leading volunteers and working with the core team through immense pressure confirmed it: Great teams aren't forged in comfortable settings like happy hours or games. **They are forged in 'the grinder'.**
- ✖ Facing setbacks, working tirelessly towards a common goal, sharing the vulnerability and triumph – that's where the deep bond forms.
- ✖ The connection feels more real when built on shared effort and purpose.

Core Lesson & Reflection

Shared struggle and overcoming adversity build the strongest, most authentic team bonds.

What shared 'grinder' experience has most strongly bonded a team you've been on?

LESSON 11

Growth Through Embracing the “Impossible”

Beyond the Comfort Zone

- ✖ What's the lasting takeaway? The undeniable value of taking on challenges that seem too big, too complex.
- ✖ You might not stay in that field, but the person emerging is fundamentally changed.
- ✖ You learn about the world, about people, and most importantly, about yourself – your limits, your resilience, your values.
- ✖ **Those lessons stay with you**, long after the race is over.

Core Lesson & Reflection

Embracing huge challenges, even those outside your comfort zone, drives profound personal growth and provides lasting, transferable lessons.

What 'too big' challenge, if embraced, would grow you the most right now?

WRAPPING IT UP

The Eleven Lessons

- I. **Humility & Commitment Over Hierarchy:** Focus on shared drive, not just performance level.
- II. **Reframe the Daunting:** Perspective turns overwhelming challenges into manageable steps.
- III. **Commitment Needs Structure & Execution:** Vision needs structure; execution is everything.
- IV. **Navigating Complexity Requires Persistence:** Complex systems demand patience, creativity, and purpose.
- V. **Success Hinges on Stakeholder Empathy:** Understand and address unstated needs/motivations.
- VI. **Execution Demands User Obsession:** True quality comes from deep empathy and living the experience.
- VII. **Lead with Empathy, Presence & Trust:** Especially crucial when leading without direct authority.
- VIII. **Resilience, Setbacks & Impermanence:** Build resilience through setbacks and gain perspective from life's fragility.
- IX. **True Impact Lifts Others:** The most lasting impact can be helping others grow.
- X. **Teams Forged in the Grinder:** Shared struggle builds the strongest bonds.
- XI. **Growth Through Embracing the Impossible:** Big challenges fundamentally change and grow you

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Lessons in Grit:

What Organizing Triathlons Taught Me About Business & Life

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Immersion: Chaos & Calm

Imagine yourself on the Mediterranean Sea, racing near Monaco. The start horn still echoes. You've just plunged into a churning chaos of water alongside three thousand bodies – a frantic explosion of bubbles, foam, splashing limbs, and a muffled roar that feels both exhilarating and terrifying. The water is a washing machine of close calls and shared adrenaline. Then, you push off, find a sliver of space, and put your head down. Instantly, the world transforms. The roar fades to a deep, resonant hum. Everything outside is muted, distant. Down here, in the cool, incredible blue, there's only the rhythmic pull of your arms, the steady beat of your own heart in your ears, and the mesmerizing dance of sunlight filtering from above. A profound, almost sacred calm envelops you, a bubble of peace amidst the frenzy. You surface for air, gasping, and the world rushes back in – the sharp taste of salt, the feel of the sun warming your back, the undeniable rumble and splash of swimmers nearby. But now, looking towards the shore roughly a kilometer away, the chaos feels different. It's the energy of the challenge, and you can't help but smile, embracing the incredible day ahead.

Looking back, it's interesting how life directs you. After finishing my engineering degree, there was this persistent feeling inside me. Not ambition, exactly, but **a need to find out what I was really capable of**. Maybe it came from hearing whispers, or direct words, that I wasn't quite measuring up. That feeling stayed with me. I felt drawn to finding a challenge, something intensely personal, where the only measure was my own effort and resilience.

The Spark: Rediscovering Swimming, Discovering Triathlon

My first proper job after university was at Vodafone – a stable, professional engineering role. The demanding nature of finishing my degree meant that sports, which had always been part of my life (some tennis, cycling, and competitive swimming when younger), had taken a backseat for a while. It felt good to be working, but I missed that physical outlet. A shift began unexpectedly at Vodafone. An older colleague learned I used to swim and suggested we hit the pool near our office during lunch breaks. We started going almost daily, and it felt fantastic to be back in the water, rediscovering that familiar effort. Then, one day, he casually asked, "Have you ever heard of triathlon?" He mentioned a club in Milan, thinking of joining.

Triathlon... the idea immediately sparked something. It had always fascinated me, this multi-sport endurance challenge that seemed like the ultimate personal test I was subconsciously seeking. But my instant reaction was still, 'No way. Because of the running.' I truly disliked running and had always thought triathlon wasn't for me because of it. Maybe it was just a convenient excuse? This colleague, however, didn't just mention it; he encouraged me to give it a go, to face the running part. His nudge was what I needed. Feeling ready for a real challenge, **I decided to push past the old excuse and chase that fascination. I signed up for the triathlon club.**



Thank you