

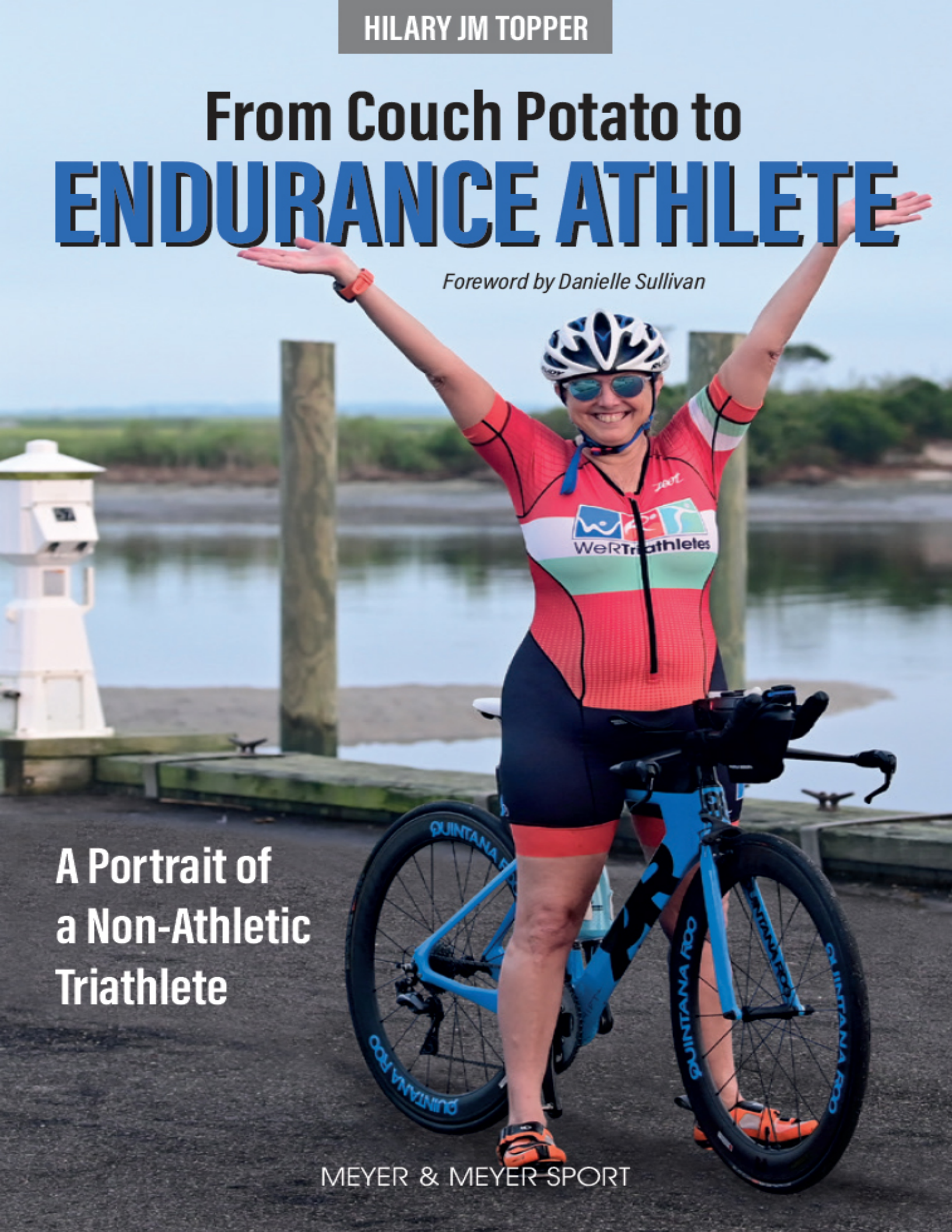
HILARY JM TOPPER

# From Couch Potato to **ENDURANCE ATHLETE**

*Foreword by Danielle Sullivan*

A Portrait of  
a Non-Athletic  
Triathlete

MEYER & MEYER SPORT



“Anyone can be a triathlete. It’s one thing to say this, however, and another to make others believe it. Hilary Topper proves that anyone can be a triathlete by sharing her own journey from the sofa to the start line and beyond. If you think you’re too out of shape, too unathletic, too old, too heavy, or too anything to become a triathlete, this inspiring book will change your mind.”

**-Matt Fitzgerald, author of *Life Is a Marathon***

---

“Hilary manages to convert a personal story into a must-read insight on the power of embracing a journey in performance. Her inviting and accessible narrative highlights her bravery, but also the fabric of what a performance journey entails. Through challenge, fear, and adversity, Hilary emerges to amplify her health, performance, and life, becoming an inspiration to many. If you are one of those people who believe you could never or shouldn’t, then read this book and get going on your own journey of excellence.”

**-Matt Dixon, IRONMAN Master Coach, CEO and founder of Purple Patch Fitness, former professional triathlete, and author of *Fast-Track Triathlete: Balancing a Big Life with Big Performance in Long Course Triathlon and The Well-Built Triathlete***

---

“Hilary Topper discovered the empowerment of endurance exercise through triathlon training. Her writing celebrates the achievements of those who were not born with the talent to win races. In her new book, Hilary relates the many training and racing experiences that enriched her life. She knows that the sport of triathlon will be there to help her process the next challenge that comes along.”

**-Jeff Galloway, running coach and creator of the Run Walk Run® method**

---

“Hilary Topper’s book is inspiring on so many different levels. For an experienced Ironman like myself, I found the races to be exciting. For someone who is still sitting on the couch, it encourages and motivates you to go beyond your comfort zone and do something that is extraordinary. This is a must-read for both current triathletes and those looking to try something new.”

**-Peter Shankman, best-selling author and two-time IRONMAN athlete**

“Whether you have been an athlete your entire life or sport is something new, this book will resonate with and inspire you. Though maybe for many of us

victory is about winning medals and being first, this book captures the power of the most meaningful successes of all. The wins are not measured by your place at the finish line, but rather by those that allow you to conquer your own personal, limiting beliefs so you can be the best version of yourself. Hilary's powerful story will transform you and empower you to push yourself beyond the imaginable."

**-Nina Sadauskas, three-time Olympian swimmer, CEO and founder of Delfina Athletics**

---

"Hilary Topper has written a must-read for anyone willing to undertake the seemingly impossible task of completing their very first triathlon. Reading this book transported me immediately back to the blood, sweat, and tears I experienced as a first-time triathlete. Hilary delivers a delightful guide packed with rich emotional detail, unvarnished truth, and the practical step-by-step information to encourage any reader to push outside their comfort zone and reach for the stars."

**-Julie Moss, IRONMAN Hall of Fame and SATriathlon Hall of Fame inductee, author of *Crawl of Fame*, race announcer, and keynote speaker**

The content of this book was carefully researched. All information is supplied without liability. Neither the author nor the publisher will be liable for possible disadvantages, injuries, or damages.

**HILARY JM TOPPER**

**From Couch Potato to  
ENDURANCE ATHLETE**

**A Portrait of a Non-  
Athletic Triathlete**

Meyer & Meyer Sport

British Library of Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

**From Couch Potato to Endurance Athlete**

Maidenhead: Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd., 2022

9781782555179

All rights reserved, especially the right to copy and distribute, including the translation rights. No part of this work may be reproduced—including by photocopy, microfilm or any other means—processed, stored electronically, copied, or distributed in any form whatsoever without the written permission of the publisher.

© 2022 by Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd.

Aachen, Auckland, Beirut, Cairo, Cape Town, Dubai, Högendorf, Hong Kong, Indianapolis, Maidenhead, Manila, New Delhi, Singapore, Sydney, Tehran, Vienna

 Member of the World Sport Publishers' Association (WSPA), [www.w-s-p-a.org](http://www.w-s-p-a.org)

9781782555179

Email: [info@m-m-sports.com](mailto:info@m-m-sports.com)

[www.thesportspublisher.com](http://www.thesportspublisher.com)

The stories in this book reflect the author's recollection of events. Some names, locations, and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. Dialogue has been recreated from memory.



# CONTENTS

Foreword by Danielle Sullivan

Preface

Acknowledgments

**CHAPTER 1** My Entrée Into Sports

**2009-10**

**CHAPTER 2** Learning to Run

**CHAPTER 3** Running Firsts

**2011**

**CHAPTER 4** Turning Point

**2012**

**CHAPTER 5** Shattered Life

**2013**

**CHAPTER 6** The Year of the Runner

**CHAPTER 7** Becoming Obsessed With Jeff Galloway

**2014**

**CHAPTER 8** Brooklyn Half Marathon

**CHAPTER 9** We Signed Up for a Triathlon!

**CHAPTER 10** My First Training Week

**CHAPTER 11** First Training Weekend

**CHAPTER 12** Triathlon Firsts

**CHAPTER 13** First Two Triathlons

**2015**

**CHAPTER 14** Working With a New Coach

**CHAPTER 15** Triathlon Training Camp

**CHAPTER 16** My 2015 Race Season—Hang on to Your Seat!

## **CHAPTER 17** Going Overboard With Races

### **2016**

**CHAPTER 18** Challenge Yourself

**CHAPTER 19** It's More About the Experience Than the Race

**CHAPTER 20** New York City Marathon

### **2017**

**CHAPTER 21** On Giving Back

**CHAPTER 22** Getting Out of My Comfort Zone

### **2018**

**CHAPTER 23** Losing My Best Friend

**CHAPTER 24** Races Where I Had to Dig Deep

**CHAPTER 25** 50-Mile Relay With the Group

**CHAPTER 26** Saint Croix's Beauty and the Beast Race

### **2019**

**CHAPTER 27** Trying to Pick Up the Pieces

**CHAPTER 28** Being a Bystander

**CHAPTER 29** Finally Made It to St. Anthony's Triathlon

**CHAPTER 30** Life-Changing Experiences

**CHAPTER 31** Turning Point in My Racing

### **2020**

**CHAPTER 32** COVID-19 Hits Us

**CHAPTER 33** Lockdown

**CHAPTER 34** Training During COVID-19

**CHAPTER 35** Building Up Endurance

**CHAPTER 36** Half-Distance Aqua Bike During the Pandemic

**CHAPTER 37** Still Swimming in the Open Water

### **2021**

**CHAPTER 38** The Year of Hope

**CHAPTER 39** Life Back to Normal?

**CHAPTER 40** Lots and Lots of Swimming

**CHAPTER 41** And More Swimming at Tobay

**CHAPTER 42** Maggie Fischer Memorial Cross Bay Swim

**CHAPTER 43** Half Ironman Triathlon Training

**CHAPTER 44** Training Continues

**CHAPTER 45** Conclusion

Epilogue



# FOREWORD

Becoming a triathlete was an easy transition for me. I was a distance swimmer in college. My senior year, I qualified for nationals, earning All-American distinction in the one-mile race. At the end of the season, I wasn't ready to hang up my athletic career. My college swim coach suggested I try a triathlon, so I did. I knew nothing about triathlon training but learned the basics, got a bike, and signed up for a sprint triathlon in western Maryland, close to my school. I won the triathlon overall and was hooked. Now I had something else to compete in!

I spent the next few years racing in Maryland and Delaware and eventually on Long Island when I moved back home. My first Ironman was in 2001, at the age of twenty-four. I won my age group and qualified for the Ironman World Championship in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii!

Success came easy for me in the sport, where I eventually finished second in my age group and as the fourth amateur overall in Kona before the age of thirty. That's when I decided to race as a professional. I raced for the Zoot Triathlon Team for another four years before hanging it up. During that time, I had some successes, placing as high as sixth in Ironman Austria and fourth in Ironman Lake Placid. I always coached athletes on the side, but in 2014, I decided to start my business, Iron Fit Endurance, taking it to the next level.

My reasons for triathlon racing were simple: compete to win and qualify for Kona. As I started coaching, I became aware of the many other reasons people fall in love with the sport. Instead of competing for a podium spot, many

athletes do it to challenge themselves. Many do it hoping to make cutoffs, hoping to get to that finish line at the end of the race.

Coaching opened me up to a whole new world. I've been inspired by so many athletes who've had to overcome so much just to get to the race, let alone complete it. I'm in awe of so many of these athletes, and I've found myself in tears as I've witnessed them coming off the bike with minutes to spare before the cutoff time or finishing the race minutes before the official time cutoff would've declared them a DNF ("did not finish"). These are the athletes who make up so much of triathlon racing today, and with each person, there's an inspiring story behind it.

Hilary Topper is one of those athletes who chose the sport of triathlon for different reasons than I did. Hilary never considered herself an athlete, far from it! She never competed in sports as a kid and barely went to gym class. At the age of 48, she decided she would try running, and she fell in love with it. When I met her, in 2015, she was just getting into triathlon. She had recently learned to swim and had just bought her first tri bike. She didn't feel confident in her abilities; she worried about being last in the events she signed up for, yet she was determined to do them anyway.

When I put myself in her shoes, I'm truly inspired. As I mentioned, the sport was an easy transition for me, one I found success in right away. It fit into my life; I was an athlete before I got into the sport. For Hilary, it was a complete reinvention of herself. Looking at Hilary's past, you can see that she's always challenged herself in diverse ways, defying odds, pushing past her insecurities and other people's viewpoints that she "can't" and she "won't." Instead, she shows that she *can* and she *does*. She became a successful business owner despite others telling her she wouldn't succeed, and then she transformed herself from a non-athlete to a *triathlete*.

Imagine immersing yourself in something that's so out of your comfort zone and opposite to anything you've ever done before. Something you and others doubted you could ever accomplish. How scary would that be for you? Could you do that at this point of your life? Reading this book will motivate you to do just that!

I've had the pleasure of coaching Hilary for the past six years, and she's an inspiration, always finding the next insurmountable goal to push herself toward and always forging ahead and remaining positive no matter the obstacle in her way (and Hilary has had plenty of obstacles).

In this book, you'll read about Hilary's journey, her bumps along the way, the tragedies in her life that she's had to navigate through, and her major successes despite all of it. I'm honored to be Hilary's coach and friend. She's a woman we can all look up to, and I hope her story inspires you to get out of your comfort zone and do something you only dreamed of!

*-Danielle Sullivan*

**Coach and former pro triathlete, Iron Fit Endurance**

# PREFACE

There are so many running and triathlon books on the market today. But none address a huge group of individuals of which I am proud to be a part of, the “back-of-the-packers.”

While we were not graced with superb natural ability like some athletes, we train just as hard, if not harder, than the elite or age-group athlete. Yet, every race we participate in is a challenge because of time. How so? Well, the question is never about whether we can do the endurance activity, because we can. The question is whether we can finish the race within the set time constraints.

Just think about how long we’re out on the course doing what we do. Some of us will reach the finish line of a Half Ironman in exactly eight hours and thirty minutes or a full Ironman in seventeen hours, while most elite or age-groupers do these distances in half that time.

Sometimes I feel like there’s a bit of shaming going on when it comes to the back-of-the-packers. We do these activities, and it takes us a long time to accomplish them, but we don’t get much respect. Most of the spectators have gone home by the time we finish events, and yet, we’ve finished them, just like our counterparts.

In “Back-of-the-Pack Runners Have More Fun,” a *Medium* article, Michael Horner writes, “After the race, I was talking with a friend who was much faster than me. As I spoke of the mud while trying to peel my socks off my feet, he said the trail was in good condition and still frozen when he went through.” That’s what it’s like to be a back-of-the-packer.

He continues: “In the back of the pack, everybody is relaxed and concentrating on living and enjoying the race. The only stress is whether we will make it through each of the time cutoffs.”

At *300 Pounds and Running*, a blogger concurs: “I started running in 2012 and races were not friendly to bigger, slower runners like me. And it hasn’t gotten any better since. As a back-of-the-packer runner, I still feel neglected and disrespected.”

There is a stigma to being a back-of-the-packer. But what other athletes don’t realize is that we’re doing this for our health and well-being. We’re doing this to get off the couch and be out in the community. We’re doing this for fun because we love it. And it doesn’t matter if we come in last because we still accomplished our goal.

This book is an adaptation of my triathlon blog. I have been maintaining a running journal of all my races and experiences during the past ten years. Although this book will appeal to any new runner or experienced triathlete, I dedicate it to those of us out there who are in the back of the pack—the non-athletes who try so hard it hurts. The ones who want to place but may never do so. This book is for you.

I hope my journey motivates you.

Thanks for reading!

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank so many people for their help with this book. For starters, I want to thank my children, Zoey, Derek, and Dan. You have been my rock, and I love you guys. I want to thank Brian for not giving me a hard time about doing what he calls, “crazy things” and always being there for me. I want to thank Mindy for her love and support through the years. Thank you to Ed, Andrea, and my nephews for cheering me on during those Florida races.

Special thanks to Madeline Silverman, who is one of my dearest friends. I asked her to read the book before publication and she had some amazing suggestions. Thank you to Lisa Gordon who is my partner at HJMT Public Relations, my friend, and confidant.

Thank you to Thomas McLean with Cardinal Publishing Group and Liz Evans at Meyer & Meyer Sport. I appreciate you both for believing in me and my story.

I also want to thank all the coaches who have helped me along the way. Special thanks to my running group, triathlon team, and all the Long Island runners and triathletes that are always ready for the next challenge! I love you guys!

And thank you for being you!

---

*"Your wings already exist all you have to do is fly."*

**-Staci Kushin Blanket, Ironman, New York**

---



---

# CHAPTER 1

## My Entrée Into Sports

---

I wasn't always a triathlete. As a matter of fact, I didn't do anything athletic until about 10 years ago, when I realized I was getting older and fatter.

The beach and ocean were in our backyard, as I grew up in Long Beach, New York. When I was young, I went to the beach with my parents, but I was never allowed in the water past my knees. "The ocean will swallow you up," my mother would tell me. So, I was always afraid. Even when I went with my high school friends to the beach, I would never go in past my hips. I was just too scared of the rip current.

When I was a kid, my dad taught me to ride a bike. My earliest memory was of him running alongside the bike and then letting it go. My mother was always a nervous person. She didn't like any of us doing any type of physical activity, including cycling. She was afraid we'd get hurt.

I can still hear her saying, "Don't go out too fast or too hard."

When I was eight, my mom took a job at Camp Wildwood. She worked at the canteen; my sister, Lori—although underage—worked as a waitress; and my brother, Ed, went

to camp there. I attended Camp Mikan-Recro, a set of sister-brother camps with my friend, Philip. Philip's mother and my mother were best friends, and his mother helped get my mother a job at Camp Wildwood.

At the wee hours of the morning, "Reveille" would play, and the girls from Mikan and the boys from Recro would jump out of bed, put on our bathing suits, and head over to the freezing lake, where we were forced to jump in. That was one of my earliest recollections of being in the water, and it wasn't a pleasant experience. They tried to teach us how to swim, but I wouldn't put my face in the water. So, I didn't learn.

Growing up in Long Beach, the second and third graders would get bused to the recreation center once a week to learn to swim. Again, I didn't want any part of learning to swim. I wanted to splash around with my friends. And that's how that went.

In 1980, when I was in high school, I cut gym as much as possible. I thought gym was a big waste of time and hung out in the smoking lounge with the rest of my friends. Anyone could smoke back then, and smoking lounges were popular in many high schools.

If I participated in PE, I was picked last, and that always made me feel horrible. I don't know why it did. I mean, I couldn't catch a ball, so why would I be picked first?

One day, when I was still in high school, a group of friends and I went for a bike ride. We planned to cross over the Atlantic Beach Bridge, a small bridge a few miles from my home. My mother didn't want me to go. "But all my friends are going," I told her. She finally gave in but was not happy.

As we were riding past the West End of Long Beach through Atlantic Beach, my friend, who is now my husband, Brian, passed me, and I hit his back wheel. Both of our bikes flipped, and I was knocked unconscious. I was taken to Long

Beach Memorial Hospital and told I had a concussion. When my mom got there, she said, "I told you so!"

My bike riding days were over for a while.

\*\*\*\*

My parents were terrible cooks. Every night for dinner, we were served burnt steak, dried-out chicken, or noodles, cheese, and butter. One time, my dad caught a fish from the bay at the end of my block. He took it, put it in one of my mother's "good" pots, and boiled it up for dinner. I couldn't and wouldn't eat it. I ran up to my room and put the covers over my head.

Back then, I weighed ninety-eight pounds and ate bologna and ketchup every day with a grape Hi-C followed by a Devil Dog. Processed foods were the in thing, and no one spoke about how unhealthy they were for your body.

That's the way I lived my life—barely eating, or eating junk, with little to no exercise.

\*\*\*\*

My childhood wasn't a happy one. At the time, no one really talked about child abuse, yet my parents practiced it on me both mentally and physically every day.

My parents married young and had all three of us young, and I don't think they were ready. My mother ruled the house, and she was very controlling. She was overweight, insecure, and I believe, looking back, probably bipolar. She always thought other people were better than we were. We were never good enough. I was never good enough.

My mother had a lot of love, but she showed it only sometimes. Later in life, she openly showed it to her grandchildren, but she didn't show it to me during my childhood. There were days when she was amazing and I loved to talk with her, and then there were other days when

she screamed at me for no reason, telling me I was an “idiot” or “stupid.” I never knew which person was going to come out that day.

My mother would put me in front of the mirror and tell me I was ugly. When I was recently talking with my brother about this, he recalled that she’d compare me to a troll, saying that the troll was prettier than me.

Although I never really saw my dad when I was growing up, because he worked three jobs, my mother knew how to get my dad going. If any of us did something she didn’t like, she’d rattle my dad and tell him to get the belt. That belt was used often, and it affected all of us in different ways.

My dad was totally devoted to my mother. She was his life.

I don’t know why, but for some reason, he found it very difficult to share his affection with us kids. I wanted it so bad. And yet, there were times when he would come up to my room as I was going to bed, and he would tell me he was going to take me on all these exotic trips. I believed him. I wanted him to take me away from the horror I was living, and I prayed that one day he would. Unfortunately, the trips never happened.

Growing up, I also never had any privacy. My mother didn’t believe in doors or locks. For the longest time, the five of us lived in a one-bedroom apartment on the first floor of our home. Eventually, the upstairs tenants moved out, and we took over the entire house.

When we moved upstairs, my bedroom doors were immediately taken off. The only one who had any privacy was my sister. She lived in the front room with two doors. My mother insisted that she needed her space because she was older. Lori was the black sheep in the family. Yet, she got all the attention from my mother. I resented Lori for it.

One time, I got into a fight with my mother. I ran upstairs to my bedroom with no doors and remember talking on the phone with my boyfriend, telling him what happened. My

dad came upstairs and took the phone out of my ear and started beating me with the phone. My boyfriend was still on the line!

\*\*\*\*

I never had any encouragement at home or in school. I remember my Long Beach High School English teacher telling me I would never amount to anything. And my parents didn't want me to go to college. They wanted me to get a job as a secretary and retire at 55. Exercise was also never a part of that picture.

My entire childhood, I was led to believe that I wasn't smart enough, pretty enough, or worthy enough. I was told that the bad things that happened to me didn't really happen. They were a figment of my imagination. My mom would always say that the disturbing things I experienced weren't real; they were just a "bad dream."

I still attempted to find out what I was good at, even though I never received the encouragement to do so. I tried lots of things while I was growing up, like playing the flute in the marching band or taking art classes. Nothing stuck. I felt like I did a lot of things but wasn't good at anything. I was depressed and had frequent thoughts of suicide. I felt utterly alone, unwanted, and a complete failure. No one seemed to care to tell me differently.

\*\*\*\*

I journaled consistently throughout my life. That was my secret place where I could share whatever I wanted without being judged. I loved to write and share my experiences in my notebook.

So, when blogging surfaced back in the early 2000s, I jumped in full force. I've been blogging ever since. Recently,

my husband made a joke to my son that “Mom writes about everything she experiences.” Haha—it’s true!

\*\*\*\*

When I left my parents’ house, my biggest motivation was that I didn’t want to live my life like them. I didn’t want to struggle for money. I didn’t want to feel like I was nobody. I wanted to be somebody.

Since my parents didn’t encourage me to go to college and I wanted to go, I spent most of my time working. I worked full time to pay for college and went to school at night. My life was mostly hard work and very little play. But when I did play, boy did I play hard!

I drank, smoked, and did everything in between. I wanted to escape the reality in which I was living. But when it was time for work, I was on time and focused.

After I graduated from college, I worked for several years at some of the top PR firms in the country and then decided to go back to school on the weekends for my master’s degree, while continuing to work grueling seventy-to-eighty-hour workweeks. I still didn’t feel good enough, even after I got my master’s degree. The voices of everyone from my childhood would sneak in and tell me I was worthless, no matter how much I achieved. No matter how hard I worked, it never felt good enough.

I remember, when I was a young girl, that my paternal grandfather told me to “reach for the stars.” I couldn’t understand how I could do that coming from a home of negativity, but as I got older, I understood what he was saying. I needed to constantly dig deep and get that encouragement from within, because I knew I wouldn’t get it anywhere else.

In the 90s, I raised my daughter and my son while starting my own business. I worked all the time while raising my children, and I felt fulfilled. And, when I didn’t work, I

devoted every second to them. When I had to, I even brought my kids with me to business meetings. Every day, there was a networking breakfast, a lunch catch-up, and a dinner meeting. I loved to outsmart my competition, and I enjoyed networking and meeting new people. I was happy for the first time in my life.

HJMT, my business, grew and grew. There were a few downturns—once after 9/11 and another after the stock market crash of 2008. But every time my firm got knocked down, I picked it back up. After every curveball that came my way, I made sure we came back stronger.

About ten years ago, something changed. I was fully absorbed in my work, but it just wasn't making me happy any longer. I didn't want to battle those curveballs anymore. I was sick and tired of the ups and downs of the business. And I needed a change.

\*\*\*\*

This is my story of how I transformed my life at forty-eight years old. It begins when I first started running and continues through my triathlon journey. I share the lessons I learned, the injuries I overcame, and the goals I achieved and failed to accomplish along the way. It's real and raw, filled with laughter and tears. My story is meant to remind you that no matter how often you're pushed down, you alone can be the resounding force to pick yourself back up and move forward. If I inspire one person, it'll make this journey worth it.



# 2009-10

---

*"Just get out the door first and see what you can do today."*

**-Bernice Imei Hsu, Ironman and ultrarunner,  
Washington**

---

---

## CHAPTER 2

# Learning to Run

---

In 2008, when the market crashed, I had to terminate many of my employees. It pained me to do so, but I had no other choice. In 2009, though, after I published my first business book, I saw a real uptick in business again. I was starting to feel good. We moved into a beautiful office in Melville, New York. I had my name on the sign at the business's entry, in the lobby, and I even had my own private parking spot. Although people said to me, "You finally made it," I didn't feel that way. Things were looking up, but the more they looked up, the more stressed out I was. My business success just wasn't giving me the high it used to. I was sick of the up and downs. And all this stress made me pack on weight. I needed something to release my nerves in a positive way and thought running could be the answer.

I was always intrigued by the runners along the Wantagh State Parkway (a road that ran north and south across Long Island). It looked so fun, graceful, and a great way to clear your head. I would drive my car and go out of my way just to watch the runners. There was something magical about

watching people run. I wanted to try it and see if I could find that magic too.

## **JANUARY**

For some reason, unknown to me, I thought my first step should be to join a gym. I had never been a gym member before, and I thought I could change my life by hiring a personal trainer.

After joining a gym, I sat with Tom, my new personal trainer, for nearly an hour, talking about nutrition and exercise. Now I was pumped and ready to work out. We scheduled an appointment.

The following day, I was at the gym at 8 a.m., ready to go. I warmed up on the treadmill. I didn't really know what I was doing. I had to have someone help me turn it on, and I started to walk.

After some time, Tom came down to get me. We went upstairs to the weight room. He showed me the equipment, and I worked out for an hour.

Everything seemed so hard, but I was determined to work it through. In the back of my head, I also reminded myself that I had to lose fifteen pounds!

When the session was over, I went home and crashed. I was out for about two hours in a deep sleep. When I woke up, I told myself that I could do this and kept going back for more.

## **FIRST SPIN CLASS**

Morris, a professional peer, and I drove together to an Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO) conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey. We were both members of EO and part of the same forum. On the ride there, he talked about spinning and how he really enjoyed it. "And you know you burn 600 calories in an hour," he said.

Six hundred calories . . . hmm . . . sounds good, I thought. I need to burn a lot of calories to lose this weight! So, when I found out that the gym had spin classes, I signed up.

A few weeks later, when I attended the class, some of the other participants were extremely nice and tried to calm my nerves. “You know, if the class is going too fast, you can change your resistance,” one woman told me. “You’ll love it,” said another.

As soon as the instructor walked in, I mentioned that I was new to this. He helped me adjust the bike and get set up. “Just start cycling,” he told me and walked to the front of the class, turned on the music, and started the program.

Okay, I thought to myself. This is it . . .

Here I was, sitting on a bike in Oceanside, New York, spinning away. As we climbed hills, the instructor told us to increase the resistance. We were on a steep hill for a long time. It felt like hours but was only minutes. “OK, now stand,” the instructor said, and the whole class got up on their bikes and rode standing up. “You can do it!” he screamed out. “Come on, even you rookie over there,” he said pointing to me. “Now come back down to first or second position and keep up the pace. I want you to count. You should be between 16-20 reps.”

He walked over to me. “How many reps?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” I said all out of breath with sweat dripping down my face, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He was very patient and explained what he meant.

After the class, I thanked him and went to my car feeling exhausted yet energized. I immediately thought of calling Morris.

“Hey, did I wake you?” I asked. “No,” he said. “What’s up?” “I took a spin class and have a quick question—what’s first position?”

## **TWO MONTHS LATER . . .**

Since joining the gym, I didn't take a break. I exercised every day for at least a half hour to an hour and a half. Yes, my clothes were fitting me better. And yes, I had so much more energy. And yes, I even lost about eight pounds.

So why was I complaining? I was always in pain!

Whenever I trained, it was tough. Every time the trainer asked me to do something else, I felt as if my legs, then my stomach, then my arms would fall off! I'm not kidding. It hurt!

I wondered if it would ever get easier.

Every time I walked into the gym, I got my card scanned, and the woman or man behind the desk said, "Enjoy your workout!"

Enjoy my workout? Who does? I could barely get motivated to go to the gym, let alone enjoy it. Every time I went, I would feel sore. Sometimes after a tough workout, I felt as if I couldn't even walk! And talk about the next day... I was in so much pain. Now, you may say, "No pain, no gain." And that's true, but I thought it would get easier. The more I was doing, the harder it was getting. I asked my trainer if he was in pain every day.

"Every day, something hurts me," he told me.

Sometimes I think that liposuction would have been the better alternative, and then I think this is the natural way to get it done. But have a good workout? Or enjoy your workout? Are we having fun yet? Or are we just suffering through it until it's over?

## **JULY**

I had never run a day in my life. After almost seven months of training at the gym, I started to run on the treadmill. When I ran my first mile, I was so excited. One

morning, my trainer told me to warm up on the treadmill. I went out very slowly, at a pace of around 4 mph, almost a walking pace, but I was able to run the whole mile. I was so impressed with myself. The next day, I did it again, even faster! A year before, I'd been unable to run a block, and now I was running a mile on the treadmill!

I decided to take my running to the next level and run outside. Boy was that hard! After a block or two, I slowed down and found it difficult to do a mile, much less a few blocks!

## **MEETING BECKY**

I met Becky at a local women's group. We went to the same high school, but she was a few years older than me, so we never met. Becky was personable, friendly, and always had a smile on her face.

I told Becky about my interest in running. She wanted to know if we could run together. I was totally intimidated. I barely could run a mile, and Becky was already a marathon runner. Why would she want to run with me?

"Hilary, it's just one minute of running, one minute of walking until you no longer have to walk, and then you're a runner," she said.

Becky was an athlete. She was a college professor and coach. She played volleyball in high school and went on to play in different tournaments. Why would she want to run with me, Ms. Couch Potato?

But she wouldn't let it go. One day, after she called again, I said yes. I was so nervous. Would she judge me? Would I make a fool out of myself?

Our first run was difficult. We decided to walk and run the boardwalk in Long Beach. The boardwalk was 4.2 miles round trip. We ran a little, we walked a lot, and we slowly made it to the end of the boardwalk and back. It took almost two hours. I was totally exhausted, but I did it. For someone

who'd never run a day in my life to run-walk four miles was a big accomplishment.

As Becky and I started to run once a week, we decided to set a goal and gear up for a half marathon. She convinced me that a good goal was a half marathon. Haha . . . I'd never even run a 5K, let alone a half, but we saw an ad in *Runner's World* that there was a half marathon at Disney World.

"What do you think?" I asked Becky via Facebook DM.

"I love the idea," she wrote. We both signed up.

Hey, it could be fun, right? I'd never raced before, but how hard could a Disney race be? Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck? Come on, it'll be a breeze, I thought.

## **AUGUST**

Now that I was up to three miles on the treadmill at NY Sports Club, I decided it was time to run with my kids. I wasn't running errands. And I wasn't driving them from activity to activity. I was on the middle school track running with them.

We collectively decided that we'd run three miles. My daughter, Zoey, who was on the high school track team, sprinted during the first mile. She was convinced that she wouldn't be able to make it. My son, Derek, on the other hand, thought it would be a breeze, but it wasn't. We all did it. We all ran twelve times around the track for a total of three miles. I ran and I walked. I certainly didn't do three miles without stopping!

The best part—I spent quality time with my kids.

## **SEPTEMBER**

It was a cold and windy day. The sky was bleak. Becky and I were on a schedule. We needed to run six miles outside to keep up with the program we got from *Runner's World* magazine.



I walked out of my house to meet Becky halfway between our homes. When we met up, we started running. The two of us ran to and up the Long Beach Boardwalk and passed other runners and cyclists. We saw the empty beach and clear blue water, a series of apartment buildings, and then the end of the boardwalk!

“Should we keep running west?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “Let’s turn back, and then we’ll run all the way to your house. That should be about six miles.”

I trusted that Becky knew what she was talking about, since she’d already run a full marathon the previous year in New York City.

At about the fourth mile, she handed me liquid energy called “Gu.” I sucked it down and swallowed it. It tasted like black cherry but had a thick consistency. Although it upset my stomach, I got a very quick boost of energy, which helped carry me all the way home.

I don’t know if it was my new sneakers, the weather, or the “Gu,” but the funny thing was, that day, I felt like I could have kept running forever.

Becky and I both trained hard for the Disney World Half Marathon. It took us quite a few months, but we finally thought we were ready.

## Lesson Learned

If you want to make a change, start today. Don’t let the voices in your head bring you down. If you put your mind to it, you can do it. Take a small goal and accomplish that first. Slowly build up each week until you reach your goal. Don’t wait until tomorrow; start today.