Paula: My Story So Far

Paula Radcliffe

Chapter 1

When first beginning the process of writing this book, I worried if there was much that people would find interesting. Quite a bit of my adult life has been consumed by running, resting, racing and recovering; what else could I write about? Yet retracing the steps of my life, I came to the conclusion that whether people found it interesting or not, it was my story and it is what has shaped me as a person. Others will see many parallels with their lives. My races may be faster, the public interest greater but the emotions I feel are those experienced by countless people. Who doesn't have achievements and disappointments in their life, successes and failures? Maybe through reading my story some people will be inspired to work harder to develop their talent and realise their dreams. If that were to happen, the writing of the book would be all the more worthwhile. In any case this book is my opportunity to tell my story, to show how so many others have affected my life and to tell of their contributions. Without them it would be a very different story.

If there is one message I want to get across it is that I am passionate about the importance of sport in our lives and what it can bring to us as people. Without sport I would not be the person I am today. The level at which I race is not the point because at any level sport teaches us. Athletics has taught me about myself, both strengths and weaknesses. I have learned to respect and be more aware of my body, how it must be looked after and what must be done to get the best out of it. What I have learned in sport is applicable to everyday life and it has helped me to make more of my life and, especially, to have more fun. Because of athletics I am more self-confident and outgoing than I would otherwise have been. Sport has also shown me how to be more understanding and respectful of the achievements of others. I've learned how better to handle and cope with the stresses that life can throw at us.

And sport has the ability to enrich our experience of life. I think of the many, many interesting people I have met, the places I have seen, the cultures I have marvelled at. It has shown me the value of getting along with people, the results that can be achieved through teamwork, the fun that can come from camaraderie. My closest friends now are people first encountered on the sport's trail. We first shared an interest in running, then we shared experiences and now we share so much more. For all of these reasons I would encourage everyone to make time in their lives for sport and always to remember that the level doesn't matter.

At a time when obesity levels are rising and posing an ever greater danger to health, the importance of sport has rarely been so obvious. People, especially children, need to be more active. I don't believe kids today eat any more or any worse than we did, but in my view they don't take enough exercise. By not getting out there and giving their bodies exercise, they hurt themselves and society in general, and they also miss out on so much.

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Essentially, this book tells how sport has affected my life. It is about the things that are important to me: the ideals, the goals and the dreams. I may not have achieved all these yet, but the ultimate goal is to be able to say at the end of my career, 'I believe I have achieved all that I was capable of achieving.' Then I will move on to my life after athletics and there will new aspirations, fresh dreams. How much longer will my career last? I don't honestly know, hopefully for a good while yet and certainly to Beijing and another shot at my Olympic dream. Who knows, maybe even to stay around long enough to be part of what could be an amazing experience for everyone at London 2012. All we need is the chance to show what we could do as hosts and I believe London would do an outstanding job and be a Games to treasure forever. Whatever the duration, my plan now is to keep going as long as I still enjoy training and competing. When it becomes a chore, when my body and mind no longer enjoy the grind, when racing is no longer my first love, then that will be the time to hang up the racing shoes. However, I can never see myself hanging up my running shoes because I can't imagine a time when I would not want to run. It is too much a part of me. I love to get out there and be one with my body, feel the wind against me, see how fast I can go. It is my stress relief, my thinking time. The act of running has and will always be something that I love and cannot imagine being unable to do.

For this reason I know that I am extremely lucky in being able to make my living doing something that I would be doing anyway. It is a privilege I have never taken for granted. When my career is over I won't push my body to the limits like I do today but I will always want to get out there and run. That's what first hooked me. And when the racing days are over, that will be the time to give something back to the sport that has given me so much.

There were occasions, particularly in the aftermath of Athens and the endless dissection and criticism, when I wondered if I wanted to share so much of a very personal story with the world. Then I thought of all the wonderful support and compassion I had received and how all the people who have backed me deserved to know what happened in Athens and everywhere else along the way. Also to know that I am okay, that I've picked up the pieces and am back to being me. I still love my running and am relishing the prospect of future races and contemplating new goals and dreams and how to best achieve them. Above all I'm back to being happy and I'm enjoying life.

Yes, I had a disaster - a big one. Yes, I was devastated for a while and the scars will probably always remain there somewhere, but, amongst other things, writing this book has made me think about what I have already achieved in my career, what I have to be grateful for in my life and what is still there for me to achieve. Often the biggest setbacks and the cruellest disappointments are what make us stronger and tougher and in the course of this book you may notice that setbacks and disappointments have always worked out that way for me so far.

The book is also an opportunity for me to thank countless people for their support. Not just the people who have directly helped me but also all of those who watch my races and cheer me on. The support has been amazing; nothing that I could write here would do it justice but I want people to know how appreciative I am.

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Experiences like the Flora London Marathons, the Commonwealth Games, the Great North events and the British Grand Prix are made special because of the tremendous atmosphere that surrounds them. These are memories that will stay with me and I feel so grateful for having experienced them. Without the people, the occasions would be nothing.

Another experience I will never forget is winning the BBC Sports Personality of the Year in 2002. The number of people who took the trouble to vote astounded me - at first I was convinced I had misheard. It touched me deeply and as an award, it has a particular meaning for me because it was decided by votes from the general public. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

When I decided to write this book, I had intended to tell my story so far and the hope was that Athens would be a happy place to end the story. Life doesn't always work out the way we would like it to but I did not need Athens to deliver that message. However, one deep disappointment is not a reason to change long-term plans or give up on my dreams. What happened at the Olympics makes me all the more determined to keep working and inspires me to try even harder. This doesn't mean the time immediately after Athens wasn't difficult for me.

I had faced the biggest failure of my career and didn't fully understand why it had happened. There were reasons, plenty of them, but I still couldn't understand what happened to make me feel so bad and so weak. However, it never once crossed my mind that my career might be over or even that I was no longer the athlete I once was. I didn't believe the marathon had beaten and broken me. Yet, I had to face all of these things and more in the media and public reaction to Athens. Facing up to what happened forced me to be hard on myself; to question myself and not be afraid of the answers. The process has been good for me.

I know I am not a quitter. In Athens I had to fight against very challenging circumstances, I made some mistakes, didn't handle some things well and paid the price for that. I will learn from the experience and come back stronger and tougher. I still have so much left to achieve and have not become a lesser athlete as a result of Athens.

After a tough emotional experience, you seek comfort and inspiration from wherever. Something I read after Athens made real sense to me. It was in a James Patterson novel and I found it uplifting because it explained something I have long felt but never worked out into words. It is, I believe, relevant to everyone's life. It is the story of the five balls: life is about juggling five balls in the air. They are health, family, friends, integrity and career/achievement. These balls are not the same, the important thing to remember is that the career ball is made of rubber but the others are more fragile. You can take more risks with the rubber ball. You may try to throw it through higher and higher loops because if you do drop it, it will eventually bounce back.

Normally, this ball does not suffer long-term damage. The other four balls need to be looked after more carefully. If you drop one of these it will be damaged and it may even shatter. To me it is an important analogy because it symbolises what is

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important in life and should be remembered. So long as we have our health, integrity, family and friends we can overcome life's hurdles.

In sport, it is especially true that we take risks with that achievement ball. I throw it higher and higher and push myself to achieve all that I am capable. At the same time I have to remember to also look after the other four balls very carefully. The last place I ever wanted to drop that ball was in the most important race of my life. Unfortunately it happened and now I have to recover it and build it back up to the heights and hoops it was at. However, what is most important is that the other balls are safe and unharmed. I still have the best family and friends, they still love me as much as ever and they have been invaluable in helping to come to terms with, and then move on from, the disappointment of Athens. Equally my health and integrity are still intact. People may have questioned my integrity for stopping in two races but I know that I ran as far as my body could go in that marathon, I could go no further.

I do not doubt my integrity or ability to push past the pain barrier in future races. With a healthy body, you can achieve amazing things. When it is not healthy it will let you know and if you persist, it will shut down. It is important to heed these warnings and in any case my body gave me no choice. For the 10,000m I did what was important to me: I gave myself the chance to run well so that I would never have to wonder 'what if?' Although it didn't come off, at least I found out the answer and can live with that. I did what I felt was right, even though I knew if it didn't work out it would be criticised. I did what I needed to do, and when I knew there was nothing left, I didn't risk long-term injury or inflict further damage on a battered body.

While obviously not 100 per cent healthy in Athens, I didn't do lasting damage to my health and drop that very important ball. I have recovered now and am already able to consider how I am going to bring that achievement ball back into play. That was one of my worries immediately after Athens: had I damaged my body long term? I felt so awful that I was concerned there was something seriously wrong with me. Fortunately the tests revealed nothing that I have to worry about and the greatest lesson from Athens concerned anti-inflammatory tablets and stress levels. I will be staying away from them in the future.

It took time for the leg injury that caused so much stress in the two weeks before Athens to clear fully and it took time for my stomach to settle down. But as I write this I am again feeling 100 per cent and very thankful for that fact. I will get that rubber ball back to where it was and there will be plenty more races and championships in the future. Athens was devastating but I will get over it and move on.

Without family and friends that would have been impossible. After Athens, Gary and I spent time with my parents. It was in the immediate aftermath and we were too raw emotionally to return home alone; we needed their support and the chance just to talk. We talked and talked, tried to make sense of what had happened and to put it into perspective. We wanted to learn from it and move on. I cried a lot on their shoulders, and they made me see that it had happened and that it wasn't my fault.

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Circumstances did conspire and I am grateful for the chance to be able to fully explain it further on in this book.

We all learn from bad experiences. What I had to take on board from Athens was that it wasn't always my fault. I had to stop blaming myself and apologising to others. We had to decide about the future and we did that. However, we also did normal stuff. Being together as a family was just good fun; spending time with my grandma, my brother and his family, all of that helped the healing and confirmed what is actually important.

Grandma put things very simply.

'You love your running don't you?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Then I know you'll carry on doing that, and doing it well. It's the way you are. You and I are the same, we adapt to things and move on. We don't stop doing what we want to do.'

When I hold my niece, Maya, and look at her innocent face it brings the point home. Post-Athens, she doesn't see me any differently. To her I'm still her Auntie Paula as I always have been and always will be. Babysitting her made me very protective of her, to the point of wanting to shield her from every disappointment. But you can't do that. It won't happen like that.

I can help her work towards things but those setbacks will be what make her stronger. Being with Mum and Dad made me see that although regrettable, painful and witnessed by millions, Athens was just a couple of weeks. One event that went horribly wrong. I walked around the garden with them and knew there was no way I was going to let this beat me, and it would only change me for the better. I am inspired that those who have always been there for me remain ever loyal.

My coach Alex Stanton is still there everyday, the same, constant reassuring presence. He helped in rebuilding my fitness and now he's working with me on the return to competition 'You have to stop thinking you're Superwoman,' he tells me. 'Not many could have come through what you faced in Athens and got to the start-line. You have to accept you're human like the rest of us. Forgive your body, get strong again and then carry on working for what you want.'

Alex's wife, Rosemary, has got the all-clear from colon cancer which is great and more important than anything that happened in Athens.

My physiotherapist, Gerard has been in constant contact and has taken a very well-earned break to recover from all the stress he suffered on my behalf. I am so grateful for all the sacrifices he has made and all his hard work in trying to help me realise my goals, his help and friendship have made me a better person and athlete and will continue to be invaluable. All of my friends have been there for me. Texts, emails, phone calls that mean so much, hugs that reassured me. As he always has been, Gary

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remains by my side. Supporting, caring and above all helping us to get back to normal. We stayed in England until all of the health tests were completed and then we went away. Not to escape but just to be together. A great deal of our life is spent away in different training venues in far-flung places. We have always been relaxed spending day after day together, doing the things we enjoy doing.

By putting ourselves into this routine we gave ourselves the opportunity of getting back to normal. It is what makes us happy. We have also had the chance to visit and explore somewhere new and we have really enjoyed our time in Arizona. The town of Flagstaff is quite small and very friendly, the countryside beautiful. I explored new trails, saw lots of deer, elk, snakes and even came across a tarantula. Not that I had been seeking that encounter! We visited the Grand Canyon, a breathtaking and phenomenal sight. That nature can create something so vast and so beautiful can make us all seem so insignificant. That is how it seems; in reality we are all significant. Each of us can make a difference by living our lives to the full, making the most of every minute and standing up for what is important to us. Of course I have trained and worked hard while all the time listening to my body and my heart. If on occasions I was too tired or didn't want to train, I didn't. But those days have actually been very few. When I went for a run in a freezing snowstorm and saw not a soul out there, I knew I was better and back to normal!

Another important thing to remember is something I see every time I visit the hot sulphur baths in Dorres, near Font-Romeu in the Pyrenees. Engraved in the rocks are the words: 'Notre plus grand gloire n'est pas de ne jamais tomber mais de se relever ? chaque fois que l'on tombe.' 'Our greatest honour is not in never falling down, but in picking ourselves up again each time that we fall.' This is so important in life. We should never be afraid to go after something that we want for fear of failure. We all need the courage to try, we may not get there straight away, sometimes we may never get there, but we must never be afraid to give all that we can to go after our goals and dreams.

The things you have to work the hardest to achieve are often the achievements you most treasure. I know this is true for me of the World Cross-Country and Championship medals on the track. I also know that by aiming for the highest peaks, you may not reach them but by aiming so high you can achieve far more than you originally thought possible. 'Aim for the moon; even if you miss, you'll land amongst the stars,' Alex would say to me as a teenager. To me, an ambitious 11-year-old who had just watched the LA Olympics and Ingrid Kristiansen setting a world record in the London Marathon, this meant I had to have the courage to go after my dreams.

Unless you put yourself on the line and give it your best shot you'll never know what you could achieve. I can tell you that the 11-year-old who wanted to go to the Olympics and win in world record time, win the London Marathon and be the fastest in the world never thought that at the age of thirty she'd have ticked off two out of three of those dreams. And she is still working on the third. More importantly I am happy with my life and with the woman I have become.

I still have so much left to do. Next year's World Championships are a definite goal and I still want that world track title. Longer term, the Olympic gold remains a goal.

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Yet as well as the medals and titles, I also simply want to compete in different races and different places. It is what I enjoy doing, getting out there and racing. And I will continue to do it as long as I am able. Winning isn't everything to me but running and giving everything is.

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