

Life's race of all or nothing

Without running, I could've been six foot under. It kept me on this planet, says Tommy Hughes

Cathal Dennehy



At this stage in life, it's easy to connect the dots. To see how the drive that once fuelled him on the roads led him, many years later, to spiral towards a dangerous edge.

When Tommy Hughes decided his running days were done, that obsession, that addiction, was never going to go gently into the night. And for retired athletes, such compulsive energy can be a dangerous, destructive force.

Olympians, more than most, lead binary lives, seesawing between long blocks of asceticism and short windows of unbridled blowouts. Denial and indulgence. Yin and yang. That's only amplified for marathoners. Those who centre their lives on running themselves into the ground for two and a bit hours have many strengths — patience, resilience, immense pain tolerance — but the great weakness of many endurance athletes is an inability to moderate.

As German cyclist Jan Ullrich, who struggled with alcohol and drug addiction in retirement, put it in the title of his autobiography: *Ganz oder gar nicht*. All or nothing.

"I should have been dead," says Hughes. "I'd go to bed at night and think, 'Well, this could be my last night here on earth.' It's happened to so many people."

Hughes is 64, and the Derry native is one of the fittest boomers on the planet. In Belfast last month, he ran a 2:36:37 marathon, carving six minutes off the world record for a man his age.

That's an average pace of 5:58/mile or 3:42/km. Back in 2019, at the age of 59, he ran a 2:27:52 marathon. In 2020, he ran 2:30:02 to smash the over-60s world record. There's never been a distance runner defying the ageing process quite like him, and there's a strange irony in that, given how close he once came to self-destruction.

"Without running, I could've been six foot under," he says. "It kept me on this planet."

Hughes is a father of four, a grandfather, an electrician, an Olympian. But at an age when the pipe and slippers might be looming large for many, he still runs 100-120 miles a week, just as he did in his prime. At 4.30 every morning, he'll haul himself out the door for a seven-mile run and after a hard day's work, he'll head back out again, covering 10 miles.

He won the Dublin Marathon in 1991 and the Marrakech Marathon in 1992, the same year he ran for Ireland at the Barcelona Olympics. But later in life, when running was no longer the centre of his world, a gaping chasm was left behind, one that needed filling by something. Anything.

"I was getting into bouts of really bad depression and I started drinking heavy. I'd go drinking for a couple of weeks then get my head together and start training, go for a few months but the mood swings would come back. It was getting worse as years went on, and then I went for three months drinking. I near killed myself."

At his worst, he drank a litre of vodka every night.

"I'd go on absolute binges for weeks then I'd shake myself down and start building up again," he says. "I kept saying to my partner, 'If I could bottle the withdrawal symptoms and remember it, then I wouldn't drink again.' Because I'd go through too much pain."

For much of his life, Hughes was the last guy you'd expect to become an Olympian. He grew up outside Maghera in south Derry and after getting married in his early 20s and moving into town, he found himself "piling on the pounds". To counteract that, he joined the local GAA club, going for runs between sessions to shed some weight. In doing so, he unearthed an ability that had been dormant his whole life.

At the age of 23, he gave the Belfast Marathon a crack, but blew a gasket after 20 miles, struggling home in 3:01. "Running that time kept me going because then I wanted to break three [hours]. The All-Ireland marathon was in Letterkenny after that, I ran 2:35 and thought, 'There's something there to be pursued.'"

In 1984 and '85, he won the Derry Marathon and perhaps the best per-

formance of his career came in 1991 when winning Dublin in 2:14:46. But the following February, six months before the Olympics, he broke his foot midway through a five-mile run, which he still completed. "It's an addiction people get, the same as smoking," he says. "You can't help going on."

He was told he wouldn't recover in time for the Olympics and was "absolutely gutted", but a few months later he was invited to a pre-Olympic training camp in Italy. All he'd done to that point was bike sessions, but he eased back into running at that camp alongside Catherina McKiernan. As athletes were loaded on to a bus to return home, a team manager announced he'd been selected for Barcelona. "A big cheer went up,"

he says. "I'll never forget it."

Hughes "loved every minute" of the Barcelona Games and 32 years later, he can still see the vastness of that food hall in the village, the galaxy of stars dotted around it. He remembers sharing a room with Irish rowers and cyclists, and toeing the line alongside his hero, John Treacy.

With temperatures in the low-30s, he doused himself with water ahead of the marathon only to feel it swiftly evaporate. "I thought, 'gee, this is a bit scary.'" The men's marathon was the last event of the Games and because of the closing ceremony that night, anyone completing it in over 2:45 was redirected to a finish line outside the stadium. Short on training, Hughes wilted like a flower in the oppressive heat, but he was

adamant he'd make it to the stadium before the deadline, which he did. He finished 72nd in 2:32:55, which left him "totally overjoyed".

But after the Games, he stepped into a void well known to Olympians. "In my head I'd reached the pinnacle. After that I lost motivation."

When he was an elite athlete, Hughes would often let off steam after his big races but the next training block was always around the corner, arduous and exhausting enough to put manners on him. But in retirement, with a job that had him away from home for long stretches, the pub became his refuge. Drinking was his antidote. But it was also his poison.

"I'd nothing to get that buzz from





He was marched to the local medical centre, barely able to walk given the levels of booze in his blood.

to walk given the near-toxic levels of booze in his blood.

"She stood by me through the real bad times when any other person would give up," he says.

A blood test turned up extremely high levels of calcium which, it turned out, was caused by hyperparathyroidism. "My parathyroid gland was taking calcium from my bones and pumping it straight into my bloodstream which means if it hadn't been detected, in years to come my bones would have become brittle and I wouldn't have been able to walk."

The clues began to add up, his chronic fatigue and depression linking back to a faulty pea-sized gland in his neck. Hughes was told he could either take medication to control it for the rest of his life or undergo surgery to have it removed. He chose the latter, going under the knife in September 2018. Weeks later he got back racing, helping Ireland to team bronze in the half marathon at the World Masters Championships in Malaga. "From then things clicked," he says. "It got better and better."

He hasn't touched a drop of alcohol since. At the time, his brother's wife linked him up with a counsellor and Hughes tried it out, but never really bought into it, feeling he alone had the keys to his recovery.

"I realised you have to do one or the other: you'll either end up killing yourself or you're going to have to snap out of it. It has to be in your own mind that you have to do it yourself. People can talk all they want but if you decide that you want to drink, you'll drink, and if you decide you'll stop, you'll stop."

He leaned on the stories of others who'd walked the same path, discovering a podcast by US TV news host Elizabeth Vargas in which she detailed her recovery. Hughes bought her book and saw so much of himself in it. There could be no moderation on the road back. One drink is too many. A thousand is never enough.

"It does go through my head but as time goes on, it gets a bit easier," he says. "I know in the back of my head that I really can't drink again. There's no point trying to say to myself I can have one or two. I know it won't happen and I'll just keep drinking. I try to find releases another way, like cycling, doing something that's not totally competitive — that type of thing."

And yet, seven months shy of his 65th birthday, he remains as competitive as ever. But the race is only with himself.

These days, Hughes runs with a "chip on his shoulder" given he's yet to clock a sub-2:30 marathon over the age of 60, which has never been done. He knows it's eminently doable, which is why he can't stop, won't stop.

"I'll keep chasing it until there's no way I'm going to do it, even if I'm going 'til I'm 70. But I'll not do it when I'm 70. I know I won't. So I

am running out of time."

In the past two years he's been plagued by injuries, from sciatica to Achilles tendonitis. Last September, he took time off work to train for the Valencia Marathon in December, which he ran with his son, Eoin. But his legs were bankrupt early in the race and after dropping out twice, he eventually finished in 2:47. After that he targeted Seville in February, but again showed up short of fitness, devoid of confidence. He dropped out after six miles. *Ganz oder gar nicht. All or nothing.*

As a former champion, he had a free entry for last month's Belfast City Marathon and figured he'd give it a crack with no expectations. Despite an infection that left him in rag order all week, he surprised himself, clocking 2:36:37.

"It was like breaking 2:30 to me. I thought, 'hold on a minute, I can still do this'. A lot of your achievements are down to what's in your head. In Valencia and Seville, I had no confidence going in as I hadn't done the training and my head told me, 'You're not ready.'"

Next time he runs 26.2 miles, he'll be ready. Having been based in England for long stretches in recent years due to work, Hughes is now back home in Maghera, where his running story began, churning the miles and targeting that elusive 2:29 at the Frankfurt Marathon in October.

A friend of his who runs a local gym drafted up a strength programme to help him keep injuries at bay and it's so far, so good on that front, while Hughes' diet is refreshingly old-school. "If I do a long run I have a sports drink after to get the electrolytes back into the system, but I don't take much supplements. It's healthy foods; I don't eat rubbish."

He's in no doubt that the new generation of super-shoes, made with carbon-fibre plates and hyper-responsive lightweight foams, have helped him in both training and races, describing them as "absolutely class". But the biggest ingredient in his success is one that can't be bought. "It's just hard work, dedication, consistency, and trying to stay away from injuries."

In Belfast, Hughes finished 25th in a field of almost 4,500, beating 99.4 per cent of the field. Does he get a kick out of outrunning so many athletes 30 or 40 years younger?

"No," he says. "I do the best of my ability and I go to the line to race as hard as I can. I'll try beat anyone, but the [sub 2:30] is the only thing driving me on. It's nothing to do with competing against people. It's competing against myself."

At many races, he gets approached by runners who are astonished at the times he can run and it always gives him a boost. "I want to be an inspiration to people who see that I can get there, so they can as well."

There will come a time when he can't run at this level, Hughes knows that, but given all he's learned about the sport, about himself, he'll stay the course for as long as he can. That drive, that compulsion, hasn't left him, but these days he knows how to channel it — pushing back the boundaries of what many thought possible for ageing athletes. This is the good kind of suffering, a healthier addiction that he's happy to indulge.

"I ask a lot of my body and I know I do," he says. "But if you don't push the boat out, you're never going to find where your limit is."

SPORT IN BRIEF



Rósi Herlihy of Granagh Ballingarry in action against Holly Ryan of Bennettsbridge during the John West Féile na nGael finals at Wexford GAA Centre of Excellence. *Picture by Harry Murphy*

Tribe and Kilkenny show championship strength

Galway and Kilkenny have joined champions Cork and Very League Division 1A winners Tipperary in the knockout stages of the Glen Dimplex All-Ireland senior camogie championship as a result of convincing victories yesterday.

The identity of the last pair will not be confirmed until next weekend's final round of group games and though last year's runners-up Waterford and League Division 1B victors Dublin are in pole position, that could easily change.

Clare made the trip to Kenny Park, Athenry to take on their neighbours harbouring their own hopes of emerging from Group 2 but while they remain in contention for a quarter-final berth after their 3-19 to 0-7 loss to the Niamh Mallon-inspired Galway, they are up against it now.

Hill continues glorious week with Belgrade silver

Danielle Hill added to her medal haul at the European Championships in Belgrade yesterday, sealing silver in the 100m backstroke.

Earlier in the week, the Tokyo Olympian, who was on the brink of giving up competitive swimming less than a year ago, stormed to victory in the 50m backstroke.

From Larne in County Antrim, the 24-year-old has been in smashing form all year, and a time of 1:00:19 in the 100m event added to her haul.

Whizz kid Dunne makes podium in Formula 3

Teenager Alex Dunne has made history by becoming the first Irish driver to stand on a Formula 3 podium at the Spanish Grand Prix.

Dunne finished in second place behind home driver Mari Boya in the sprint race in Barcelona. The second place was the best finish of the Formula 3 season for 18-year-old Dunne, who won the 2022 British F4 title and was runner-up in the 2023 GB3 Championship.

Springboks warm up for Irish by defeating Wales

Wales boss Warren Gatland hailed an

"exceptional" performance by captain Dewi Lake that epitomised a battling display against world champions South Africa at Twickenham.

Despite conceding two tries and collecting two yellow cards during the opening 15 minutes, Gatland's team made it a contest until two late South African scores confirmed a 41-13 victory for the Boks, who play Ireland in a two-Test series next month.

Wales trailed only 14-13 at half-time following a try for Lake, with fly-half Sam Costelow adding two penalties and a conversion.

"I thought he [Lake] was outstanding today," Gatland said. "I thought he was exceptional in terms of the way he played and led the team."

Warriors brave altitude to mount URC comeback

Glasgow Warriors landed the United Rugby Championship title for the first time since 2015 after a hard-fought 21-16 victory over the Bulls at a sold-out Loftus Versfeld.

Having beaten the Stormers, the 2022 winners, and defending champions Munster to reach the grand final, the Warriors avoided a third loss in the showpiece with a fantastic performance in Pretoria in a game where the Bulls took an early 13-0 lead, only for Huw Jones' try — Glasgow's third — to be the difference late on.

Young holds nerve to seal historic round of 59

Cameron Young carded the 13th sub-60 round on the PGA Tour but left his chip for a record-equalling 58 woefully short in the third round of the Travelers Championship.

The world number 23, who has finished runner-up on tour seven times, catapulted himself into contention at TPC River Highlands with a superb round which saw him cover the front nine in 28 after holing out from the fairway for eagle, and also narrowly missing out on a hole in one.

Needing to birdie two of the last three holes to match Jim Furyk's 58 on this course in 2016, he left a seven-footer by the side of the cup at the 16th but hit his approach at the next even closer to get to 11 under.

He came up short of the 18th green and then left his chip for a share of the record nine feet below the hole, but held his nerve to add his name to the history books.

Tommy Hughes: 'I ask a lot of my body and I know I do. But if you don't push the boat out, you're never going to find where your limit is.'

Picture by David Conachy

athletics so I started to get the buzz from alcohol. Because I was driven all the time, that became an addiction which I couldn't break. The alcohol had got a grip on me and I wasn't able to shake it. I pushed myself in the same way I pushed myself in running. That's the drive I have from running: it's all or nothing. I can't find the middle ground."

Hughes ran in stop-start fashion through his 40s, but in his early 50s, he noticed a troubling trend: a series of sporadic mood swings. A bout of chronic fatigue took him to a dark place and he started drinking more, which only made things worse. It was his partner, Anne, who forced him to face his demons, marching him down to the local medical centre in Maghera, Hughes barely able