

Chapter 5

Malc Kent: The Early Years (Part 1 of 2)

“Age is whatever you think it is. You are as old as you think you are.”

—MUHAMMAD ALI, Boxer

Although my first official experience of running as a sport was at the age of 6, I didn't really begin to take it seriously as anything more than a convenient means of transport until I was 10. I can still remember that Saturday morning, aged 10, running my first road race around the streets near my school. It was just a 3-mile race, so a modest start by any stretch. And it was around the grounds of the school, which, in my head at the time, was as uncool as it got. But it immediately ignited my ferocious competitive edge and I refused to let anyone else overtake me and win that day.

I did have a slight advantage over the other kids as I had already been using running on a daily basis in order to get to and from school or from one friend's house to another. Plus, having a Kenyan mother meant I had already been exposed to the “East African way” and how Kenyans lived, trained, competed and dominated distance running internationally.

I'm a firm believer in the power of difficult and challenging experiences, as a child, having a big effect on emotional resilience and tenacity as an adult. As a mixed-race kid growing up in a completely white English town, in semi-rural Britain, I had my fair share of challenges. Britain is not a forgiving place for any kid who stands out in any way at all. It's an intense and highly strung, melting pot of a country where the tolerant and the intolerant attempt to coexist, side by side. Between the ages of 7 and 11, I would often come home with torn clothes and grass stains on my white shirt.

And as a kid getting picked on at school I figured there were only two choices: let the situation beat you and be told what to do for the foreseeable future, or fight back, give as good as you got and mentally stay on top. Never for a second as a kid did I ever think of anything but the latter option. It was just my in-built instinct, at that time, to rise to a challenge and fight back with everything I had. Yes, I would get into trouble at school and some scrapes outside of school, but I never seemed to back down or look for an exit route. When the going got tougher my reflex was to dig a bit deeper. I recall having this voice in the back of my head telling me that I was better than people gave me credit for and that this situation was just temporary. I had absolutely no way at that age of knowing whether this was in fact true, but the convincing nature of the rhetoric was enough for me.



At the age of 11, in keeping with the English school system at the time, I moved from the regular educational system to a selective grammar school and got introduced more formally to a competitive academic environment and to the sport of cross-country running. Mostly, cross-country was a way to keep the school kids occupied in the winter months and instill some discipline, or in some cases exact some torture. My early memories are of shivering wet cold, thin shorts and T-shirts and totally inadequate canvas shoes with no grip, running 5 miles on saturated grass and soft mud, around a hilly country park, while trying not to fall over too badly or get hypothermia.

In those early days of cross-country, two of us kids stood out as having the running talent and slightly psychotic edge that was required to absorb the punishment and actually enjoy the challenge. When I say it was usually borderline hypothermic, I really mean it! A typical cross-country run would see my buddy Doug and I race each other to the very end, no matter what, while 16 to 25 other kids would walk, cut corners and cheat or just not even bother turning up by handing in bogus sick notes, before the start. So it was no surprise that Doug (who had bad eyesight, wore glasses and couldn't read the ground as well as I could) and I were the two who moved on to run outside of the school and race for real.

Over a period of four years my progression through the borough and county levels led me to the English Schools' Championships, where I finally had the chance to run against the best kids in the country, against a number of "known" runners, including a young Mo Farah.

Not that I had any idea at the time who he, or anyone else, was. I just loved head-to-head competition and the chance to test myself and see what the other runners had in the tank, on the day. The fact that I never had a pair of proper cross-country spikes didn't faze me. If it was muddy you just worked harder. If kids with better footwear passed you on the hills, you just worked harder still.

The problem for me at the age of 15 was that I also had a strong passion for climbing, and this was taking more and more of my time. Meanwhile I was also on a fast track to joining the Royal Air Force and becoming a pilot, a journey that really took a lot of my time and energy. So at 16 my flirtation with running was mainly through the sport of orienteering, and this, through a series of coincidences, fit well with the military.

Orienteering

Orienteering is the sport of navigation, using a highly detailed map. Whether you're an experienced hiker, competitive runner or just a family or group out for an activity in a park, this sport helps you improve your navigation each time. Orienteering can gradually build your map-reading skills, from exploring a local city park full of obvious structures to navigating remote terrain with few, if any, man-made features.

On orienteering maps, a course consists of a triangle, circles, a double circle and sometimes connecting lines all in purple. The triangle is the start. The double circle is the finish. All the circles in between are checkpoints. Numbered orange and white flags are placed in the terrain to show you that you have reached the correct location. At each checkpoint you will punch, registering that you've found the correct location. You may use any route you want between checkpoints.

For all participants, the structure of an event is a safety function. At the end of the event, the number of returnees needs to match the number who started, so always check in with the finish line volunteers, even if you don't complete your course. This keeps the sport safe and fun.

Orienteering events are timed. If you're a runner, running against the clock is a familiar experience, but orienteering provides added challenges of a staggered start and deciding where your own course goes as you are running. And if you're a non-runner, automatic timing from control to control provides a way to measure your navigational effectiveness across routes and compare later with others who made different choices. Good route choice often beats raw speed.

—Excerpted from <https://orienteeringusa.org/explore/what-is-orienteering/>

Although I ran once a week with a local running club, I had just run out of hours to race on roads or in cross-country. Finding the time to cycle out to run with Maidstone Harriers or catch the train to run with Kent Athletic Club was nearly impossible, even for an ambitious eternal optimist like me.

Just to give a brief insight into my style back then I should explain a little bit about my addiction to physical effort. From the age of 11, I lived in a village 7 km from my school. Every day I either ran or cycled to and from school. If the backpack was too heavy with books and kit then I cycled. If not, I ran. The journey was far from flat, with numerous challenging hills. But running and cycling this route wasn't enough; I also had to beat the bus no matter the traffic conditions, which I normally succeeded in doing.

During school I would always do at least one hour of intense exercise and after school would be anything from cross-country to rugby to orienteering to obstacle course racing. I have no idea about my actual calorie burn but my mum will tell you that she couldn't buy enough food to keep up. We eventually had to drop to cheaper off-brand products just to keep the grocery bill under £100 per week (which was a lot for us then).

A lot of this stemmed from my natural innate hyperactivity. At the age of 6, I was diagnosed with a rare hyperactivity disorder, a disorder that up until the age of 14 would see me spontaneously burst into uncontrolled hyperactive fits. And, as I was to find out later in life through testing with the air force, testing with Red Bull's high performance division and various detailed sleep studies, there are certain parts of my deep brain that are constantly overactive. It's rarely expanded into the territory of a bad attention deficit disorder, and certainly did not hold me back academically, but it did require me to learn how to manage and harness it, as I grew up.

This process was entirely self-taught and based on trial and error feedback, as there was never any professional support and mostly the condition confounded doctors who would then shrug it off and declare that I should just get on with my life. My parents had no idea what it was about and didn't really have any interest in dealing with it, so understanding it and working with it essentially became a lifelong project for me.

The upshot from all of this is that I have unusually high levels of motivation for anything and everything, never get down or depressed, have a tendency to pick up very annoying sleep disorders and have never-ending levels of internal competitive instinct, whether it's an exam or an orienteering competition. More than this, it has made me extremely aware of everything that is happening in my body and my head at any given time, which, I can tell you, really is a double-edged sword.

On the subject of the curious sport of orienteering, my final Junior National Championship in the sport, in 1996, still makes me smile today. It was near a place called Camberley in the southeast of England. I was in the solo competition as well as a team competition. I ran through the finish in the solo competition to no real great acknowledgement and an empty finish area. At which point I panicked and thought I must have missed something somewhere. In fact, I must have made a huge error to come back to an empty finish. There was clearly, rather unnervingly, massive potential here for a great screw-up of epic proportions.

After nervously handing in my punch card I sat down and waited for something to happen. My head was spinning with thoughts of how I could have messed up so badly and how I was going to explain this at home and at school, on Monday. But, much to my relief and slight surprise, after a few minutes other runners began to roll in. Even as the results were announced and the award ceremony began, I was still unsure if I had won or come last. After hearing that second place was not me, finally I got my moment of relief and a calmer heart rate as my name was announced for first place. Unfortunately the team competition didn't go so well and a few strange-sounding excuses from my teammates about checkpoints in ditches not existing drew the curtain on the team hopes pretty quickly.

The interesting thing about orienteering was that I wasn't the best runner in the competition. I was good but not clearly the best. My secret weapon, it turns out, was my brain and its quirks. You see, I had an uncanny ability to visualize things in 3D in very vivid detail in my mind's eye at a moment's notice, no matter the setting. And it goes way back. I can remember, as a 5-year-old, driving across Europe with my family and my dad throwing the map at me and asking where we were and what directions were required. It's worth bearing in mind that I was in the back seat with a limited view of the landscape, and my dad had a very short fuse and serious impatience under stress.

In one particular situation my dad had thrown me an old, soft bound map that was falling apart, with several key pages missing and some out-of-date drafting of streets that no longer matched the current reality. And yet I was somehow able to account for the missing pages and navigate for my dad through the south of France and into northern Spain, avoiding costly toll roads and linking together country roads – even accounting for recent road updates that were not on the map.

It was later in 2014 that brain monitoring and scanning revealed that I had an unusually developed hippocampus, and highly active parts of my temporal and posterior parietal lobes, all linked to my overactive deep brain. At the time that I was 5, and even as a teenager, I really believed that everyone was seeing what I was seeing. I really couldn't understand it when other kids looked at me like I was taking LSD. I think if it hadn't been for my work with top psychologists and neuropsychologists later in life I would still be wondering the same thing today.